

VILLAINESS LEVEL 99

I May Be the Hidden Boss
But I'm Not the Demon Lord



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Prologue

Several months had passed since I had graduated from the Royal Academy, and I'd slowly become accustomed to reigning as the lord of Dolkness County. The county lands had become somewhat derelict in the absence of attentive management, but after I assumed lordship, the demesne had gradually become a bustling and productive community.

This was only possible because of the aid of everyone around me. Patrick, my fiancé, helped me to communicate with the public officials and servants without being negatively misunderstood. Daemon, my deputy, made progress on various projects that he hadn't been able to execute due to my parents' interference. Ryuu, my dragon, became an iconic feature of the manor village, and he seemed to maintain order merely by flying around the place. Rita, my maid, worked hard managing all of the other servants.

As for me, the lord of this county... Wait. Thinking about it, I wasn't sure I had made any contributions at all. I had continued to leave clerical tasks to Daemon, and I was pretty sure that Patrick handled almost all of our external affairs... Aha! I'd funded this entire operation. I had poured all of the funds I'd gathered from dungeon crawling into public works projects, spending them as freely as if the money just grew on the trees around the village. Other than that, I also... Besides that, I... It was no use. I hadn't done anything of note. Even when it came to paperwork, all I usually did was give my stamp of approval with no further input.

"Am I unneeded in Dolkness County?" I murmured, without thinking about who might overhear.

"Yumiella?" The voice of the companion at my side jarred me from my thoughts. "Whatever are you muttering to yourself?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

The girl strolling down the streets of Dolkness Village by my side was Eleanora, the daughter of the (former) Duke of Hillrose. She had come to live with me following the revocation of her father's title.

Eleanora and I were, well, something like...friends? So I didn't mind helping her out for a little while. Because of that, Eleanora, as the daughter of a fallen aristocrat, was currently something of a freeloader—in other words, she was working even less than I was. There was no way a born and bred lady of the nobility like her could ever put in a hard day's work.

With nothing better to do, she was consequently once again tagging along on one of my periodic inspections of the manor village, but wasn't she bored spending time with me, going around such a humdrum town?

"I'm so happy that we get to walk together like this," she sighed gratefully.

"I'll support you for the rest of your life, Lady Eleanora. You won't have to work a single day," I assured her.

Who did this?! Who made Eleanora feel as if she were unnecessary? No matter how you look at it, I, in fact, am the most unnecessary person here.

"I've been helping out at the church, but... I don't think that counts as working," she admitted.

"What? Do you mean the Sanonist church?"

"Yes. Oh! What if we visited the church together, right now?"

"I'll pass on going to church."

I prefer to stay away from religion... Wait, no. That's not my concern right now. What I'm surprised by is the fact that Eleanora felt the impulse to do something like that at all. Which brings me back to my point: am I actually unnecessary?

I continued my stroll through Dolkness Village while pondering the possibility of my uselessness. After all, as the lord of this county, it was important to see how the town was doing.

Is this actually important, though? Isn't an inspection basically just a vacation

for important people? I don't think they actually do any work during an inspection. In fact, I'm not doing anything even approaching work right now.

I need to find something meaningful, some kind of work that only I can do...

Just then, Eleanora suddenly exclaimed, "Oh! It's Sir Patrick!"

"Really? I wonder what he's doing."

Patrick had supposedly headed out this morning to take care of an errand. He'd said there was no need for me to go with him, but that had just made me wonder even more about what he was doing. This wasn't the first time that he'd gone out without mentioning what he was up to. Where was he going?

"Let's follow him, Lady Eleanora," I said impulsively.

"That sounds like such fun!"

"What's Patrick doing?" I wondered. "Could it be...that he's cheating on me?"

"I am certain that cheating is the one thing he would never do."

Eleanora's confidence in Patrick was admirable. Truthfully, I had only mentioned cheating as a joke, because I also trusted him greatly. This trust truly ran deep, and if I had to compare it to something, I might liken it to—

"We're going to lose him!" Eleanora startled me from my Patrick-based reverie. "Hurry up, Yumiella."

"Oh, right."

Luckily, he hadn't noticed us at all. We continued to tail Patrick as he moved through the village.

Soon, we arrived at the outskirts of town.

"Patrick has something to do way out here?" I muttered.

"Whatever could that shack be?" Eleanora asked.

The building that Patrick had just entered was actually a guard station.

Oh, I see, he's just doing his job.

The guards were soldiers hired by the Dolkness family, and the work they did

largely consisted of maintaining order, much like a private police force. There were various stations scattered across Dolkness Village, and this particular one was positioned to observe anyone entering town. If someone suspicious-looking were to walk past, a guard would come out of the station and question them.

It occurred to me that it would probably be difficult for this small-time police force to handle an invasion from, say, a foreign army. I'd recently overheard somewhere that our guards weren't actually very strong... That's when it hit me—I had finally happened upon a job that only I could do.

I strode confidently towards the guard station, with Eleanora trailing behind.

"Oh, have we finished tailing Sir Patrick?"

"We're done. I have found what I'm meant to do," I declared. "I became the lord of Dolkness County in order to do it."

I should have realized it sooner. I probably would have if I'd ever interacted with one of the guards, but... That's right. Now that I think about it, I've never spoken with any of them before. On paper, I am their boss, so I probably should've come to see them ages ago.

For whatever reason, I had never found the time to come by for an inspection, nor had I ever passed by a guard in town during my walks.

Could it be that...the soldiers are avoiding me? That can't possibly be the case. There's no way that the heroes that protect this town would be afraid of me.

I continued my march towards the shack, and upon arrival, I vigorously flung the door open.

"Pardon me. I'm the lord of the county, Yumi—"

"Run!" a soldier shrieked.

Inside were seven men, and upon seeing me, everyone except for Patrick bolted for the back door in utter panic. The door in question was narrow—there was no way that the swarm of large men rushing towards it could escape easily through it all at once. As they piled up in an inevitable traffic jam at the exit, I cast a spell.

“Dark Bind.”

Black hands stretched out from the shadow of each man and bound their bodies. They screamed in terror, but there was nothing to worry about. *Dark Bind* was nonlethal, which was a rare quality for the spells that I tended to use.

“What are you doing here, Yumiella?” Patrick asked.

“I followed you.”

“I’m sorry, everyone. This is my fault,” Patrick apologized, bowing his head to the bound men for some reason. He turned to me and continued. “I’m the one who kept these soldiers away from you. I arranged things so that you wouldn’t come by for inspections, and I instructed them to run away if they saw you in town.”

Why would he do something like that? I would never do anything detrimental to the guards.

“I just wanted to help everyone,” I explained, trying to clear up the misunderstanding. “I thought I could help all the guards with their level grinding...”

Now that I had actually met them, I realized that our guards were much too weak. I wouldn’t expect them to be strong enough to beat me, but I wanted them to at least be able to deal with *Dark Bind*. How could anyone feel safe living in a town in which the people ostensibly meant to protect it were so easily restrained?

This was the one meaningful task I could take on.

I’ll round up all of the soldiers, and we’ll go dungeon crawling. If we’re fielding that number of people, we should have no problem pressing forward into the deeper levels. I can guarantee their safety too. Even if someone’s lower body gets slashed off and sent flying, I’ll heal them with my recovery magic.

I presented the gist of my level grinding plan. As Patrick let out a deep sigh and the guards violently shook in their boots, Eleanora wandered in late and curiously glanced around the inside of the guard station.

“This is exactly why I didn’t want you to meet the guards.” Patrick met my eyes and spoke as if he were trying to explain things to a small child.

“What do you mean by that?” I huffed.

“Their job is to maintain order. They don’t need your level of strength for that.”

“I’m not saying they should become level 99. I just think they should be a *little* bit stronger. Maybe...around level 50?”

If I remember correctly, the Commander of the Knight’s Order, who is said to be the strongest warrior in the kingdom, is around level 60. That seems like it would be a bit overkill, so I’ll just leave it at level 50. Maybe that’s actually too low?

The guards gulped as Patrick nodded to himself. “Yes, it does look like I made the correct decision.”

“Why—”

“Hold on, allow me to rephrase this: don’t take my work away from me. This is one of the ways in which we’re dividing up responsibilities. Please take a step back from this. For me.”

“If that’s what you want...”

I see, dividing up responsibilities. I guess it wasn’t right to try and take over someone else’s jurisdiction. I’ve heard many stories about different factions fighting over official positions in the Royal Capital. Public officials, military and civilian alike, trying to expand their territories... Oh, I get it!

“You’re a military official, and I’m a civil official!”

“You? A civil official?” Patrick snorted.

“Huh? Am I wrong...?”

“No, you’re correct, you’re a civil official. Anyone would agree. You lot think so too, right?” Patrick turned to the guards for affirmation, and one after another they concurred: I was definitely more of a civil official.

I see, I get it now. I’m the lord of this county and a civil official! It’s no wonder

that the military wouldn't like me getting up in their business. But...technically the guards are under my command. Oh, this must be what civilian control of the military is. I learned something new today!

On the way home, the three of us—Patrick, Eleanora, and I—walked side by side. All that talk about military and civil officials seemed to have been too difficult for Eleanora to keep up with. It appeared that she had enjoyed looking around the station, but still, I thought it would be best to apologize.

“I’m sorry, Lady Eleanora. That must have been boring for you, with all that talk about civil officials and such...”

“I enjoyed myself thoroughly. Though one thing I thought I might mention is that Daemon seems much more like a civil official than you do, Yumiella.”

“That’s true.”

Daemon was kind of like the ultimate bureaucrat. The title of civil official fit him several hundred times more than it did me. From managing taxes to planning projects, Daemon was in charge of everything that seemed like a thing that a civil official might do.

Wait... Doesn't that mean I'm not doing the work of a civil official?

“Convenient lies do appear in unexpected places,” Patrick said, pressing his hand against his forehead in a manner which suggested he might be feeling somewhat stressed.

Once again, I felt unmoored in my lack of purpose. Could I force the guards to level grind after all?

Walking alongside me, Patrick noticed that I was agonizing over something.

“Is something bothering you, Yumiella?”

“I’ve been thinking that maybe I’m unneeded in Dolkness County. I’m not involved with training the soldiers like you are, I’m not able to manage taxes like Daemon does, I can’t do chores around the mansion like Rita, I can’t fly like Ryuu, and I can’t do...whatever it is Lady Eleanora does. I can’t... Um, well, yeah.”

“That’s not true. There are many tasks that only you can do.”

“Don’t lie! All I have going for me is that I’m the strongest person in the world, and I have a lot of money!”

“Aren’t those two things enough? ...Well, it’s clear you’re not satisfied with that,” Patrick said with a wry laugh. “Daemon, Rita, Ryuu, even Lady Eleanora, as well as I myself—we all wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you. It’s because you’re here that everyone can work hard for Dolkness County.”

Patrick’s words seeped into my heart, making it feel warm and full.

“You really mean that?”

“We need you. Everyone needs you, Yumiella.”

“Me too!” Eleanora chimed in. “I would never wish to be without you!”

To my right was Patrick, to my left was Eleanora, and back at the mansion, everyone else was waiting. In the past, I had been alone, but now I was surrounded by all of my friends. I’d never been happier, and it made me feel very proud to think I was the one who had built such a strong community.

I see now. Thank you, Patrick. I can’t believe I had been so anxious because I couldn’t see such a simple truth.

“Thank you. That must mean...that people are drawn to my overflowing virtue.”

“I don’t think that’s *quite* it...”

It seemed that others didn’t consider me virtuous. (Admittedly, truly virtuous people probably weren’t called the “Demon Lord” by parts of their social circle.)

In the end, I didn’t discover my purpose in my life in Dolkness County, but I did learn that I was surrounded by wonderful people.

I hope I can protect everyone with my level 99 strength, I thought to myself at the end of this perfectly normal day.

Chapter 1: The Hidden Boss Meets the God of Darkness

“I’m the god of darkness, Lemn. Wake up, my priestess.”

“You have the wrong person,” I protested.

I found myself in a space that was utterly dark, where a black-haired boy stood before me with a friendly smile on his face. He seemed to have mistaken me for a priestess.

I don’t blame him, since I give off exactly the same pure and innocent vibe as a priestess does.

“I’m sorry to say, you don’t seem like the pure and innocent type.”

What did you say? I consider myself to be a very wholesome person. I’m so pure that if I were to unify the continent into a single nation, they’d put the word “holy” before that country’s name.

“The Holy Empire of Dolkness, huh? ...Hm?”

I awoke in my own familiar bed, muttering the name of some nonexistent country. Imagining Dolkness as an “empire” was pretty weird on its own, even without the “holy” part.

Hm, I feel like I had a weird dream. A dream in which I was talking to a super important person or something... It’s no use. The more I try to remember it, the foggier my memory gets.

Since I was awake so early, I finished getting ready on my own and left my bedroom. It wasn’t unusual for me to have a dream I could only half remember, but for some reason, I couldn’t stop wondering about this one.

“It was someone really important. I feel like they were even more important than a king. Maybe an emperor? That’s why it was an empire?”

I realized that I wasn't quite sure what the difference between a kingdom and an empire was, nor was I entirely certain who outranked whom, a king or an emperor. Whoever it had been, they had left such a vivid impression in my mind that this person must have been more important than the leader of any kind of sovereign nation.

"The only other thing I could think of would be a god..."

Me receiving a divine message in my dream? That sounded impossible. I wasn't devout enough to become some kind of prophet, nor did I even believe in the existence of gods. It was probably nothing but a weird dream.

Telling anyone that I can hear divine voices is a terrible idea. Claiming to channel the voice of god seems like a great way to get burned at the stake.

I still had some time until breakfast, so I considered finishing up some of the work that I hadn't gotten to yesterday. Just then, Eleanora rounded the corner and started heading in my direction. It was unusual to see her awake at this hour; she always overslept.

Upon spotting me, Eleanora scurried my way, chattering excitedly. "Yumiella! I heard a god's voice!"

A fallen aristocrat *and* a heretic? I almost imagined that I could hear the mob coming for her now.

After the Duke of Hillrose's plans for the coup d'état had come to light, his ducal status was revoked. This meant that Eleanora no longer enjoyed the privileges of nobility. Though she seemed cheerful on the surface, perhaps this was only to mask her distress. It was possible that her inability to handle the intense stress could have caused her to turn to a nonexistent god for salvation.

If only I had been more empathetic towards her... I shouldn't have just brushed off what she was saying, thinking she was spouting some idiotic nonsense again. That was her way of sending an SOS.

"Lady Eleanora, how would you like to visit the Royal Capital?" I asked in the most upbeat tone I could muster, hoping to cheer this pitiful girl up. "I'll buy you dresses, jewelry—whatever your heart desires."

“Oh my! You’re being so kind all of a sudden! I suppose this proves that you can’t even trust the word of a god.”

“What do you mean?”

“The god said to be careful around you!”

This “god” is wary of me? Does that mean Eleanora’s subconscious dislikes me? Well, whatever. I suppose there’s no use trying to analyze Eleanora’s auditory hallucinations. I’ll just focus on doing my best to show her a good time.

“Oh, since we’re going to the Royal Capital, why don’t we visit His Highness as well? I’m sure he’s worried about you, Lady Eleanora.”

“Sir Edwin...”

“Yes, your beloved Prince Edwin!”

Until very recently, Eleanora could be convinced of anything by bringing up Prince Edwin’s name—which is why I had brought him up by force of habit, without thinking properly. Now that she was a fallen aristocrat and he was the second prince, they could never end up together, and I had accidentally reminded her of this unfortunate fact.

“No, we can’t,” Eleanora sighed, her expression clouding. “I’m no longer an aristocrat, and Sir Edwin is a member of the royal family. It would only cause trouble for him if I were to tell him how I felt.”

“Lady Eleanora...”

“It’s all right, though! I have you and Sir Patrick! There is joy to be had in this new life!” Eleanora said, mustering a brave smile.

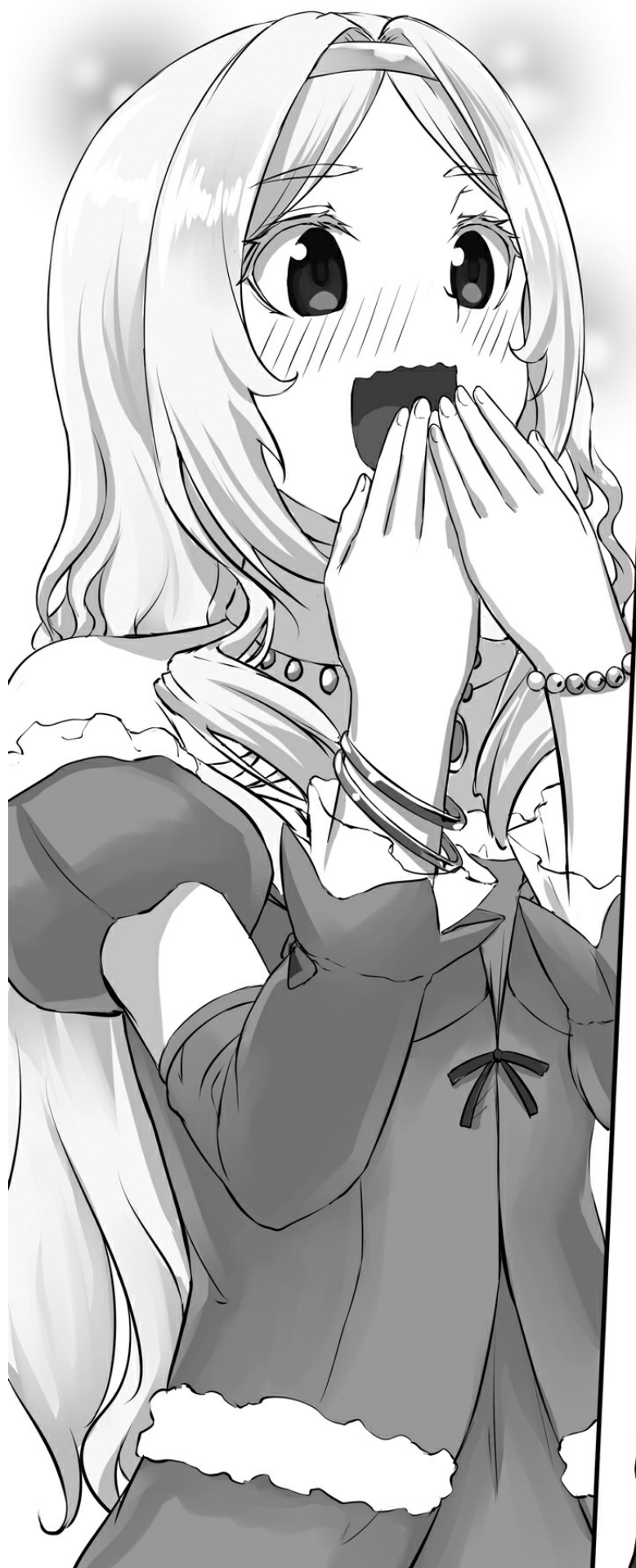
Oh no, I feel like I’m gonna start crying. She’s so gracefully stepping back out of care for the person she loves. Eleanora’s such a good girl that it hurts. Maybe I should put everything I have into getting her and Prince Edwin together. With that thought, I visualized the prince’s face, imagining us standing by the altar, Eleanora on my arm... I won’t give away my darling Eleanora as your bride! You have no right to call me your father!

“I’ll provide for you for the rest of your life, Lady Eleanora! In fact, I’ll marry you!”

“What? Your partner is Sir Patrick, Yumiella.”

“No worries, I’ll leave him. I’m calling off our engagement. It’s the trendy thing to do these days.”

“What?! What are you even saying?!” Eleanora covered her face with her hands in shock and disbelief.



I'll just have to end things with Patrick. If it's for my dear Eleanora, I have no choice.

Eleanora's hands leaped suddenly from her mouth to press against her head, and she let out a little scream. She scanned our surroundings wildly.

"Huh...?" She seemed dazed.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Did you not hear the voice that spoke just now?"

I hadn't heard anything. Since my hearing was better than Eleanora's, it was highly likely that she was having an auditory hallucination. Perhaps the stress was getting to her after all.

Eleanora explained that she'd heard a voice saying, "I don't approve. I'll be there right away."

The voice of someone who would be against our marriage... I see. It must be that overprotective father of hers. So he's coming here, huh? Hold on... I should just go and see him myself. I'll let him know that his precious only daughter is all mine! Bwa ha ha ha!

"We need to go see the duke... I mean, the person who is totally not your father but just happens to look exactly like him."

"Oh, wonderful! We get to visit father!"

He was, of course, only someone who *looked* like her father. After all, as far as the rest of the world was concerned, the Duke of Hillrose was dead. Various parties had a vested interest in the duke's death, so it would be quite a mess if it got out that he was still secretly alive.

I scooped Eleanora up into my arms and jumped out of the nearest window, running to my adorable dragon Ryuu, who was asleep in the yard.

"Well then, let's head out."

"Eek! I can walk on my own! Put me down!"



An hour later, we arrived at the village in which the ex-duke lived, one that

had just been built several months ago. Granted, a full fifty-five minutes of that hour were spent waking Ryu up, and only five were spent flying here. In retrospect, running would have been faster.

The sun was now rising, slowly warming the chilly autumn morning. We walked to the house we'd visited together several times before, and I knocked on the door with a perhaps overly exuberant violence.

"Come out! The lord of the county has arrived," I called.

Eleanora's father opened the door, irritation written plain on his face. "Shut up! Why do you always bother me..." His expression changed when he caught sight of his daughter. "Eleanora! Welcome, come on in. I'll prepare some tea."

"Father!"

The pair of them embraced and entered the house hand in hand.

Your daughter's going to be nineteen soon. Aren't you guys a bit too clingy?

I attempted to enter the house as well, following behind them, but Eleanora's father swung his head back and shot me a glare.

"I have no need for you. Leave us at once."

"I've come to notify you of a betrothal."

"A betrothal? You mean between you and the margrave's boy? I already know, and I have no plans to celebrate the occasion."

"No, between Lady Eleanora and me."

"What?! What's the meaning of this?!" The man shoved his daughter protectively behind him. "Eleanora getting married?! Who is she marrying?! Who the blazes is the man?!"

Oh, he misunderstood me, and he thinks that I meant his daughter has a boyfriend. There's no need to worry; she's marrying me.

"Like I said, it's me."

"What?"

"I said, Lady Eleanora and I are getting married."

“Wh—” my future father-in-law sputtered, his agitation briefly winning out over her his coherence. “I won’t allow it! I won’t have it!”

I guess he’s not going to give us his blessing after all. Maybe Eleanora’s auditory hallucinations were a subconscious manifestation of his unpleasant personality. But I have no need for his blessing. He can’t even leave the village without risking discovery. There’s no way he can get in the way of our true love.

“It’s perfectly fine if you won’t allow it. We’ll do what we please.”

“You don’t deserve Eleanora, and you’ll be a terrible influence on her! I’m going to keep my daughter away from you!” Eleanora’s father snatched up a hoe leaning against the entryway and took a battle stance.

Are you planning to fight me? Bring it on; I’ll take my bride from you by force.

Just as we were about to launch into combat, Eleanora interrupted us hesitantly. “U-Um... Father? Yumiella? I’m not marrying you, Yumiella.”

What, no way?!

We both returned to our normal stances and turned to her.

“I like Yumiella, but not in *that* way,” Eleanora explained.

“Is that true, Eleanora?!” her father demanded. “Does that mean you haven’t been violated by this despicable individual?!”

“No, I haven’t!” Eleanora confirmed emphatically, her face bright red. Did I just get...rejected?

The former Duke of Hillrose looked my way with a delighted grin. I was vexed.

“Ha ha, how pathetic, Countess.”

“Urgh...” I switched tactics. “Lady Eleanora, would you like to go on a trip? Let’s find a getaway destination with a beach. It’s autumn, but it shouldn’t matter if we’re not swimming.”

“How glorious! I’ve only been to the beach twice!” Eleanora sidestepped her father and made her way towards me.

I gave the former Duke Hillrose a smug look with a scornful chuckle. *He* couldn’t take his daughter on vacations; he couldn’t easily leave this village.

Why don't you sit there and imagine us enjoying some seafood or something?

The man's face twisted with animosity before quickly reverting to a kind expression.

"Eleanora, why don't you stay here tonight?"

"How delightful! It's a sleepover!"

I had lost. Eleanora left my side and went towards my opponent. To my annoyance, the sleepover card he'd played wouldn't work for me because Eleanora and I already lived together.

But I do have a card with a similar effect. Draw!

"Lady Eleanora, would you like to have a pajama party tonight?"

"How splendid! We can stay up late and talk all night!"

"Eleanora, let's make dinner together tonight," her father offered. "I've learned how to make a few things since coming here."

"How marvelous! I get to cook with father!" Eleanora kept bouncing back and forth between her father and me.

This was becoming a battle of endurance. There was a limit to how many more cards we could play, but holding back would result in an immediate loss. We had to keep picking the strongest cards in our hands.

"Lady Eleanora, would you like to have an *imoni* party?"

"How thrilling!" She seemed to consider a moment. "What is an e-moanie party?"

"It's a party during which you make a dish that isn't particularly good outdoors in a pot."

"I don't want to go to one of those..."

What?! I'll admit, imoni is pretty much just miso soup. But, there's something deep in my soul screaming out that I should never forgive those who make fun of imoni parties or who prefer soy sauce to miso in their imoni. It's actually a fun autumn tradition once you've tried it. As far as other outdoor cooking activities go, I'm against barbecues, but I'm okay with imoni parties.

Eleanora, who had returned to her father, was now getting excited about a sleepover again. Had the winner been determined?

What's something Eleanora likes...?

"I see, so you won't be coming home tonight. That's fine. Patrick and I will entertain ourselves. By adorably feeding each other. The two of us alone. Together."

"Oh! I think I'll pass on the sleepover after all," Eleanora told her father. "I'll be going home. Of course," she gushed, turning to me. "I won't bother you two, so please adorably feed each other all you like. I promise not to peek. I definitely won't."

I win. Romantic scenarios are her favorite. So much so that every time she catches me and Patrick alone together, she hides behind a pillar or a wall and stares at us with an almost terrifying intensity.

As expected, Eleanora was now sporting the biggest grin of excitement she had shown all day.

"Eleanora, I'll spoon-feed you your dinner," her father suggested as a last resort, unable to accept his loss.

Who wants their father spoon-feeding them? I've prepared the ultimate bait, romance between her two best friends. She would never turn on me now...

"How thrilling! Father's going to feed me dinner!"

My best friend had betrayed me for her father.

I really don't understand what makes these two tick. If it's come to this, my next move is to...

And so, we waged a battle, fighting over Eleanora. In the end, it came down to a duel. I had no recollection of how we ended up settling on a duel. That's just what war was like—it could be triggered by something so trivial. We passed the point of no return long ago. Looking back on it now, it might have already been set that we would be dueling from the moment I had arrived. No matter how many times we did this over, we wouldn't be able to outrun our fate.

“Are you ready?”

“Of course,” the ex-duke said scornfully. “You’ll regret it if you depend on your high level to win.”

We were going to throw our strength at each other, and the winner would get Eleanora. It was the simpler, purer way to settle our differences. The arguing we had done up to now felt insignificant and pointless.

Eleanora’s father and I readied ourselves in his front yard. I was planning to fight with my bare hands while he was armed with a sword. Eleanora had left to roam the village, saying she was bored.

Her father and I were about ten steps apart from each other. With my physical capabilities, I could close that distance in the blink of an eye. I was ready to send him off with the strongest attack in the world the moment that the duel began.

“Well then, the duel begins the moment this rock hits the ground,” I announced.

“Certainly. That moment will be your end.”

I threw a palm-sized rock high up into the air and declared, “Lady Eleanora is my friend.”

“Eleanora is my daughter,” her father retorted.

Neither of us looked at the rock—we both had our gazes locked on our nemesis.

“My victory will be set in stone the moment I hear the rock hit the ground.”

“Say whatever you’d like while you still can.”

Surely, the rock would plunge to the ground soon. The time it was taking to fall felt like an eternity. The battle was certainly less than mere seconds away from beginning.

After waiting a bit more, I finally spoke up. “It’s not coming down...”

“Strange...”

We both looked up at the sky, but the rock was nowhere to be seen.

Huh? I definitely threw it.

I began looking for a new rock to start the process over. Just then, I heard a voice call out to me. I turned to find Patrick behind me.

“What are you doing here, Patrick?”

“What are you doing now...?” he asked with a sigh.

“The du— I mean, *this guy* and I are about to duel.” Patrick gave me a look that asked “why?” so I had to explain things from the beginning. It started when... “Um... I was going to marry Lady Eleanora. Oh, by the way, I decided to call off our engagement.”

“My engagement ended without me even knowing.”

“So I came by to let her father know and to say hello, but Lady Eleanora turned down my proposal. So I thought I could pretend that I’d never called our engagement off if I kept my mouth shut.”

“My engagement is back on without me even knowing.”

“After that, her father and I started fighting over Lady Eleanora, but we couldn’t decide on a winner, so we challenged one another to a duel.” Lady Eleanora herself was currently traipsing around the village. The more I listened to myself explain the situation, the more nonsensical I found it to be.

But how did Patrick know where we were? Does he have a tracker on me? As those thoughts flashed across my mind, Patrick opened his mouth to explain.

“Ryu came to fetch me just now. He probably figured that you were in over your head.” Behind Patrick was Ryu, looking a bit ragged after going back and forth between the estate and the village twice now.

Ryu is such a good boy.

I couldn’t deny that there was a possibility that this duel would have developed into an actual battle to the death if Patrick hadn’t arrived.

The former Duke of Hillrose threw down the sword in his hand and spat out, “Hmph! Looks like your dragon is more intelligent than you are.”

“Oh come on, that’s a bit too much praise,” I demurred with a smile. “He’s

still quite the handful, you know?”

Ryuu was complimented for being a good boy! It's nice to hear regardless of who it comes from.

A blue vein throbbed in the ex-duke's forehead as he turned to Patrick. “You're the one in charge of her, right? How about you take responsibility and watch her a little more closely?”

“Um, well... You're right. I'm sorry,” Patrick said apologetically.

There's no need for you to apologize, Patrick. I'm the one who's mostly at fault here.

After that, there was no escaping Eleanora's father as he talked our ears off about topics ranging from how I was a bad influence on his daughter, to how he was worried for her safety in my presence, to how he felt sorry for her having to put up with me. This went on for some time.

We didn't escape from the nagging duke until well past noon. The three of us returned home and rested for a bit before having lunch.

Eleanora stared, mesmerized, her eyes sparkling, as she watched me shovel hot soup into Patrick's mouth.

“Hot! It's hot! Stop it!” he exclaimed.

I want to sleep peacefully tonight. I think I'll have the pajama party rescheduled for some time after tomorrow.



“You seem to get into a lot of trouble. Or rather, you seem to attract trouble to yourself.”

“People are always getting me mixed up in their problems. It's been a real issue for me.”

“I think it's usually your fault.”

I was having this dream again. The one with the boy in the utterly dark space, the one who claimed to be the god of darkness, Lemn. He was dressed in black

from head to toe, in high-quality clothing that lent him an aristocratic air.

Why did I forget all these details the last time I woke up?

The self-proclaimed god with black hair flashed a smile, showing his white teeth.

“Do you remember your dream from last night?”

“I believe we were talking about whether I was pure.”

“Well...as long as you remember it.” The boy tilted his head to the side as he smiled. The sight was cute, and he didn’t seem like a god in the slightest.

I’ve always wanted a brother like this. Dear god, please give me a little brother.

“Wouldn’t you be better off asking your parents instead of me?” he asked innocently.

“Never mind, I don’t want a little brother.”

If I were to suddenly gain a younger brother at this point in my life, it would be more than awkward.

I should accept things as they currently are and enjoy my life as an only child. Wait... Did I even mention wanting a brother out loud?

“I can tell even if you don’t say it out loud. This is a dream. There are no such things as truths or pretenses in a dream, are there?”

“Clear your mind, clear your mind, clear you mind,” I chanted under my breath.

Don’t think about anything. Don’t think about not thinking about anything. I’ve got to clear my mind. I can’t even think about clearing my mind. If I reach a state of enlightenment, then this demon enlightening the dark corners of my mind won’t be a threat.

Clear your mind, clear your mind, clear your mind.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if clearing your mind was that easy?” He paused and then said one word. “Patrick.”

Clear your mind, clear you mind, I like Patrick, I like him so much, I love

Patrick... This is bad, Patrick is getting into my inner monologue. Even if it's Patrick, anyone who gets in my way will be someone I'll ha— There's no way I would. I love him. Four turrets, a total of sixteen guns, fire the "I love you" barrage!

"What is an 'I love you' barrage...?" the boy asked after a short pause.

"Aaagh!"

Having my private thoughts read so closely by Lemn felt so horribly violating that I fell to my knees. I cried as I slammed my head repeatedly against the black floor made of an unknown material.

I want to wake up already. I want to flee from this public humiliation as soon as possible.



I shot up, a pained groan escaping my mouth as I awoke. I was in my room. I wiped away the sweat that had been collecting on my forehead as I looked out the window and saw a soft beam of light pouring in from the gap between the curtains.

It was morning, and it appeared I had woken up early once again. I got out of bed and walked towards the source of the sunlight. I flung the windows open, my eyes squinting at the light shining on me. The cold, fresh air washing over me felt nice.

Though I'd woken up in the worst way, this morning sun felt like it made up for it, leaving things at a net zero.

I still can't believe that a god showed up in my dream. Maybe it's a sign that I'm going to die.

"What a weird dream..." I mumbled to myself.

"It wasn't a dream."

"What the?!"

I definitely heard a voice coming from behind me, at very close range. It was the voice of a prepubescent boy. I quickly turned back and scanned the room but couldn't find the boy behind the voice.

Am I still dreaming? I thought to myself as I kept my guard up and pinched my own cheek.

“It...doesn’t hurt?”

“I don’t think that’s because you’re dreaming, but rather that your nerves that sense pain are dead,” the voice mocked. “I’m right here.”

There it was again. It was coming from the floor...no, from my shadow, cast by the sunlight shining on my back. As I stared at my shadow, the human-shaped silhouette slowly trembled. Ripples began to form on the shadow, like it was water, and a black-haired boy appeared from within.

“This is our first time meeting in the real world, my priestess. I’m—”

I was used to things appearing from my shadow. In the dungeon I used to frequent, there was a monster known as a Shadow Assassin, which would ambush people by jumping out of their shadows. It was annoying at first, but I had conditioned reflexes that could handle these monsters; the moment something came out of my shadow, I would automatically attack—that was just how my body was trained to react.

Of course, the same thing would happen even if the thing that appeared from my shadow was a young boy who looked nothing but human. Before I knew it, I had kicked the boy, who still hadn’t fully emerged from my shadow, in the chin.

“I’m the god of darkne— Whoa!”

“Oops, sorry.”

I caught myself just barely in time to reduce the amount of force I was using. The boy went flying, bouncing off the ceiling before falling onto my bed. His refined features seemed to survive my attack without getting destroyed.

Phew, glad he’s okay... He is okay, right?

The boy pressed his hands against his chin as he stood up. “Ouch... Jeez, I know how rough you can be, but wasn’t that a bit much?”

“I’m sorry, it’s muscle memory at this point. So...who are you?”

“Like I said in your dream, I’m Lemn, the god presiding over darkness, but you can just call me Lemn,” the self-proclaimed god said as his expression softened

into a smile.

There's no way he's just a human when he appeared from my shadow. Is he really a god?

There were so many questions I had for him: what exactly a god was, why he'd called me a priestess, and whether I could also enter people's shadows. The most important was, of course, finding out how I could enter shadows—everything else paled in comparison. Just as I was about to start asking my questions, I heard Patrick calling to me from outside my room.

"Are you awake, Yumiella? What was that sound?"

"Oh, that was, um..."

Patrick had heard the sound of Lemn slamming into the ceiling as well.

Maybe I should have him sit in on me questioning Lemn... Wait. A strange boy with a pretty face in my bed this early in the morning... There's no doubt about it—he's going to think I'm cheating.

Despite the fact that Patrick trusted me, I was fated to be constantly misunderstood. It would be terrible timing to be suspected of infidelity now, when we had a wedding coming up.

The door slowly opened as if ignoring the fact that I was frozen, leaving me panicking at the crisis I was facing.

"Yumiella? I'm coming in," Patrick announced.

"Wait! I'm completely naked right now!"

"What?!"

The door that was about to open was shut vigorously.

All right, that should've bought me some time.

The culprit behind this dire situation himself was sitting on my bed, without a care in the world.

"What's wrong? You're dressed."

"Hurry, you have to hide."

Where should I hide him? The closet? That feels too obvious, I'm going to get caught. Why did this even happen? There's no way Patrick would believe someone appeared from my shadow... That's right, my shadow! He came from my shadow, after all—my shadow's the best place for him to go. Return to whence you came!

I dragged Lemn off my bed and shoved him against my shadow.

"Come on, get back into the shadow."

"Ow, that hurts! That won't even work!"

Despite using my strength to press the boy into the shadow, all that I got was a creaking floor.

Do I need to use more force? I thought to myself before grabbing the boy and slamming him into the floor with all my might. I slammed him against the floor over and over, as if I were kneading dough.

"Come on!" I grunted.

"Ow! Hey! Stop!"

I repeatedly picked up the black-haired boy before throwing him at the floor. All that came of it was the sound of something hitting the floor.

Maybe I'm throwing him in the wrong direction? He appeared from his head, so maybe he needs to go back in headfirst?

I repositioned my grip to hold Lemn upside down and tried throwing him into the shadow from his head. I swung him up and down several times, like a drink labeled "shake well." It looked like brute forcing this wasn't going to work, so I had no other choice but to try a bunch of things and see what worked.

"Go back, go back. Please, go back where you came from," I pleaded. Lemn didn't respond.

It's no use, he's not going back in.

All the commotion caused by my trial and error until this point had been audible to Patrick on the other side of the wall.

"What in the world is that sound?! I'm coming in!" His patience had run out,

and he barged into the room.

“No, wait, hold on!”

Patrick froze upon seeing me. Of course he would; his fiancée was alone with some strange, pretty boy in her bedroom. It was obvious why he would be suspicious of me cheating.

It's okay, there's nothing illicit going on here. I'm sure he'll understand if I just explain things honestly.

“This isn't what it looks like!” I exclaimed. “Come on, you help explain things too, Lemn.”

Huh...? Um, god of darkness? Can you please say something?

The boy that I was holding upside down was silent with his eyes shut. He almost seemed lifeless.



Patrick, who had been stunned, finally opened his mouth. “Y-You’ve finally gone and done it...”

I couldn’t fault him for suspecting me of infidelity after witnessing this scene, but he said I’d “finally gone and done it.” That meant he’d expected that I would cheat one day. I’d never realized that he trusted me so little. This shocking discovery weighed heavily on my chest as I was overcome with pain and sadness.

That’s not what happened at all... It’s just a misunderstanding...

“You’ve finally gone and...killed someone!”

“Hold on, that’s *really* not what happened!”



Lemn was alive. There was no way I would let myself become a murderer—no, a god-killer. It was *definitely* bad to kill a god.

After the passed-out Lemn regained consciousness, I had him show Patrick how he could appear from and reenter my shadow. After finishing that exchange of information, we had him explain things.

“Hm, where should I begin?” Lemn wondered aloud.

“You should start with how to enter shadows, obviously. Can I do it too? Are there any tricks to getting it right?”

“That’s something only I have the power to do, so you wouldn’t be able to do it no matter how hard you tried.”

“I see... I have no further questions, then. You can go home if you’d like,” I said as I pointed towards my feet. As soon as I found out that I couldn’t enter shadows, my interest in Lemn quickly diminished.

Lemn returned my cold, disinterested gaze with puppy-dog eyes. “Aren’t you curious about who I am, miss? I don’t think you believe that I’m a god.”

“It’s not like I would treat you any differently whether you’re a god or not.”

“Hey, miss, you’re my priestess, you know?”

“Can you decide whether I’m ‘miss’ or ‘your priestess’?”

I don't care anymore. The fact that I can't enter shadows is all I needed to know.

"I've never heard of a god of darkness named Lemn; are you really a god?" Patrick asked, seeing how the boy was slightly tearing up.

"I know, right? Isn't it all fishy?"

"We know that you're not just a regular child since you can go in and out of shadows, but... I'm sorry for suspecting you like this."

"You're so kind, mister..." Lemn said as he gave Patrick a faint smile. Since they were both good looking, the scene was quite picturesque.

I'll shut my mouth, then. I'm just a decorative houseplant.

"It's understandable that you wouldn't have heard of me," Lemn continued. "My faith has long been lost...or should I say, *had* been lost."

"Does that mean that faith in the god of darkness is being revived? Does that have anything to do with you calling Yumiella a priestess?"

"You're sharp—that's right. Um, how should I phrase this... There's like, faith energy? And that energy is pouring into me through her." Lemn and Patrick then turned to look at me.

Hey now, I'm not doing some religious-leader-type thing like that. I guess my time being a plant is over.

"I never even believed in the existence of gods until yesterday."

"Many of my believers are near here, so I'm pretty sure that's what's happening."

"Do you know exactly where these believers are?"

"Of course, I think they're actually within walking distance."

That meant they were definitely in Dolkness County.

I don't like the idea of some unknown religion forming so close to me. It looks like I'm getting mixed up in it in some form too.

Why had this lost religion revived in my territory? Why had faith in the god of darkness even ceased in the first place? I hadn't considered it because of his

pretty face, but there was a possibility that he wasn't a very good god.

"I have a question too," I began. "Can you explain in specific terms what exactly a god of darkness is?"

"Isn't that a bit too abstract a question? I guess it's fine. I'm one of the six gods born simultaneously with the creation of this world. I preside over various things, like darkness, the night, the moon, dreams, illusions, monsters, dungeons—"

"Hold on. Does that mean you're the god of monsters? Doesn't that make you an enemy of mankind?" It was no wonder that faith in this god had died out. My wariness of Lemn grew another level, and I could feel Patrick brace himself beside me.

Monsters couldn't be separated from the history of this world—the two were endlessly entangled. There were countless kingdoms that had been wiped out by monsters, and wars had been repeatedly started in search of areas where monsters wouldn't spawn.

Lemn let out a sigh, shaking his head to signal that we had it all wrong. "Nope. Monsters are part of the world's metabolism. They're needed in order to cycle all the magical energy in the world. They're basically a natural phenomenon. Water is necessary in this world, but there are people who die in floods, right?"

"So you created monsters for the world's benefit?"

"Nope, that's also wrong. When I was born, most of this world's systems were pretty much completed. The only things I created were dungeons and magical instruments. I also gathered monsters underground, where people wouldn't go, and provided tools that couldn't be made by humans... I've done a lot to help humans, you know?" Lemn said with a pout as he turned away. Perhaps this childlike attitude was also to make us let our guard down.

It was true that magical instruments were helpful. Human-made magical instruments all seemed to be made based off dungeon-made items, and they used magical stones obtained from monsters as their source of power. There was no doubt that Lemn's creations bettered our lives.

However, there was something I understood because of my memories of my

past life: while being beneficial, magical instruments were also standing in the way of scientific advancement. Technology had stopped making progress several hundreds of years ago in this world.

He probably provided tools for the benefit of humans, in the way that a parent worried for their child would. However, would a parent be in the right to stand in the way of their child's growth? Was a god that only gave gifts without also allowing for independence an ally or enemy of mankind?

Actually deeply thinking about something for once, I had fallen silent. Patrick hadn't said anything either, perhaps lost in his own thoughts. Seeing us quiet like this, Lemn stopped pretending to sulk and continued speaking.

"On top of all that, isn't it difficult to level grind without monsters? It's precisely because you're taking down monsters, whose bodies are completely constructed out of magical energy, that people can gain power."

"Lemn! I'm so sorry for doubting you, you're a wonderful god. Let's build a shrine for you."

I see now, he's the god of level grinding. Why didn't he say anything sooner? You're the GOAT (god of all time), Lemn. Who cares about, what was it again, scientific advancement? It has nothing to do with me. I honestly couldn't care less.

Upon watching me fall to my knees and hang my head, Patrick mumbled, "Are you really okay with that, Yumiella? Well...I guess this is how you usually are."

"Oh, so this is normal behavior for her?" Lemn asked.

Do they think I'm someone who only cares about level grinding? How dare they?

Regardless of what they thought, the important thing right now was level grinding. I was already level 99 when I entered the Academy. No matter how many monsters I'd taken down since then, my level hadn't increased. I'd given up on increasing my level any further, having thought that the level cap was just a part of how this world worked.

But now, after all this time, there was a ray of hope. A god might know the way to unlock the level cap.

“Do you know how to increase the level cap, Lemn?”

“I’ve been watching you all this time, miss, but you’re actually kind of intimidating to talk to.”

“Is there a level higher than 99, or is there not?” I looked up and met the boy’s eyes. If I just asked with sincerity, he would surely answer my question.

Look into these pure eyes of mine. They’re not the eyes of someone who would level grind to carry out nefarious acts, are they?

“Your eyes are scaring me, miss.”

“The level cap unlocking, please.”

“There are several different methods to do that,” Lemn finally said after a short pause. “The shackles on levels are just a law of this world, and only operate within the context of each given world, so...”

I wanted to know specifics; I couldn’t care less about the laws of this world or theory. I silently stared into Lemn’s eyes. His black irises reflected the face of a woman who, despite looking expressionless, was exerting an incredible aura.

“Fine, I’ll tell you so don’t stare at me so much,” he complained. “But I need to explain things in order, so let me start from the way the world works... You might not believe this, but there are an infinite number of other worlds, in other words parallel worlds, aside from this one.”

“Do you mean separate continents?” Patrick asked. I knew from personal experience that otherworlds existed, but this was likely a difficult topic for Patrick to wrap his head around.

“No, there are several entire worlds that exist. It’s known for sure that everything in the world, from the sun and the moon to continents and people, all exist in places that, although they appear similar, are completely separate and will never converge.”

I still wasn’t sure how otherworlds were related to unlocking the level cap, but I couldn’t leave Patrick behind in the conversation. I decided to add my own explanation to help him understand.

“They’re worlds that can have differently shaped continents, or have different

levels of development, or not have magic and things like that...right?"

"No, that's wrong."

"What?"

"What you're talking about are...worlds different from this one. I think they're called otherworlds? They exist in theory, but they're out of my observational range, so I can't say they exist for sure."

Now that I think about it, he said parallel worlds, not otherworlds. I see, so we're talking science fiction, not fantasy. Sorry for confusing you, Patrick.

"I see. So parallel worlds are worlds that are generally the same as the one we're in, with differences in the details."

"That's it! You're surprisingly smart, miss!"

I'd grown up seeing all kinds of futuristic gadgets on TV, so I had a basic understanding of science fiction.

I don't know if parallel worlds were covered though. Maybe exploring alternate timelines counts as covering parallel worlds?

Patrick seemed to kind of understand after hearing our conversation. "In other words," he began, "there are other worlds almost identical to this one, and the people in this world also exist in those worlds...?"

"Yup, that's pretty much it," Lemn responded.

"Do Yumiella and I exist in those worlds?"

"There are as many versions of you as there are worlds. Of course, of you as well, miss..."

I get it. Parallel worlds. I guess if otherworlds exist then it's not so strange for parallel words to also exist. So, what does that have to do with unlocking the level cap? Can you please get on with it?

"Like I said earlier, the shackles limiting levels are a law that only operates inside each individual world. Imagine a tree. Of the countless branches spread out across the tree, one is this world. There's one of each of you in each of the branches."

“So one branch is a single world?” I asked.

“Exactly. While you’re in that one world, the level limits will continue to operate. In order to be freed from those shackles, you, a resident of the branch, have to become a resident of the tree.”

From the branch to the tree...

Though Lemn’s explanation felt poetic and convoluted, it made sense to me right away. All I had to do was go from being a resident of this world, to a resident of the infinite parallel worlds that existed... It sounded impossible.

“Wouldn’t that be difficult?” I asked.

“There are several ways to do it. You could take down a being that outranks you, like a resident of the tree.”

“A being that outranks me... So a god? Will my level cap unlock if I defeat you?”

“Heh heh, would you like to find out?” Lemn asked with a mischievous smile.

I see, I get it now. There’s only one thing for me to do, then.

Just as I was about to pounce on the boy before me, I was restrained from behind.

That was too quick. Did he anticipate me making a move? Also, the force he’s using to hold me back is stronger than I expected.

“Let go of me, Patrick!” I exclaimed. “I can’t kill him like this!”

“You’re going to die!” Patrick called out to Lemn. “Hurry up and run! I won’t be able to hold her back for much longer!”

“A-All right.” Lemn nodded. After hearing Patrick’s warning, he finally made a move. He made his way towards us for some reason.

I see, he’s going to escape by going into my shadow. Unfortunately, my shadow is not only his escape route but also where I attack from.

“Shadow Lance.”

Countless black spears appeared from my shadow, into which Lemn was trying to flee. The spears all plunged into Lemn—he didn’t have time to dodge.

The moment I thought I had won, however, something unexpected happened.

Just as they touched Lemn, the *Shadow Lance* spears all disappeared. The dark magical energy that had dissipated slowly disappeared as if it was being sucked up by him.

“Why...?”

“Heh heh. Did you really think that you could harm *me*, the god of darkness, who is darkness itself, with dark magic? Jeez, I got worked up for no reason,” he said with a composed smile.

Dark magic doesn't work on him? Would my spell with the most firepower, Black Hole, also not work? I'm not giving up yet. If magic doesn't work, then...

Patrick's grip restraining me grew stronger.

Shoot, he noticed. But Lemn has totally lowered his guard. Now is my best chance.

“Run!” Patrick shouted. “Yumiella won't stop just because her magic won't work!”

“Mister?”

“Let go of me, Patrick! If magic doesn't work, I'll just punch him with physical force!”

“J-Jeez, you're strong.”

“Aaargh! Let goooo!”

I already knew that physical attacks were effective on Lemn because of everything that'd happened before Patrick arrived. Even a god could be taken down with a few good punches.

I flailed my legs around while still being held back from behind to show Lemn that I'd kick him if he got close to my shadow. Having lost his escape route, his face tensed up.

I don't care if you beg for your life.

“H-Hey, miss,” Lemn began. “How does it feel to be embraced by the man you love?”

“What are you talking about all of a sudden...? Hurry up and run!” Patrick shouted angrily upon hearing the boy’s flippant words. I could hear Patrick’s voice right by my ear.

Ugh, his kind voice is nice, but the tone he’s using now is also good. He sounds angry, but it’s out of concern for Lemn’s safety, so it’s actually kind too. Not only that, but he’s using a loud voice, and it’s right by my ear. It’s like listening to his voice at an earsplitting volume... This is the best.

Now that I think about it, he’s embracing me from behind right now. Our bodies are touching more than they ever have before. Doing something like this in front of a child... Patrick is so bold. Hugging me so tight that it hurts... Well, it doesn’t hurt, but let’s just say it does. It hurts.

“Patrick... It hurts to be embraced so tightly...”

“What?”

“It’s still morning, but, um, if you insist, then we can...”

“Huh?”

“But Lemn is watching, so...it’s embarrassing. I’d rather do things like this when we’re alone.” I stopped resisting and surrendered myself to Patrick, and in turn Patrick slowly let go of me.

Huh? We could’ve just stayed cuddled up like that forever.

I turned back to find Patrick sighing with an incredibly fatigued look on his face. Lemn also sighed at the same time, layering the sounds of their exhales.

Don’t add unnecessary noise to Patrick’s sounds, Lemn.

“I really thought I was going to die,” Lemn said, relieved.

“I apologize. I didn’t think *that* would stop Yumiella, though.”

“Heh heh, she wants to fire an ‘I love you’ barra—”

“Aaagh!” I shouted in an attempt to erase Lemn’s words as he was about to reveal what had happened in my dream. By bringing up unlocking the level cap again, I could hopefully divert the conversation away from this. “So! Is it true that I could level up by defeating you, Lemn?”

Patrick braced himself, anticipating I would launch into an attack again.

“That’s a lie,” Lemn said, beaming.

“What...?”

“I asked if you wanted to find out, but the truth is that the shackles limiting levels won’t come off just by defeating me. If people are residents of the branches, that would make me the caretaker of the branches. There’s one of me for every parallel world, just like humans.”

“Does that mean your level maxes out at 99 too?”

“Yup. I’m just a helpless boy who exists in this single world.”

What the hell, my rampage was all for nothing. All that did was unnecessarily use up strength. Patrick’s strength, that is.

“When it comes to topics like levels and strength, jokes go over Yumiella’s head,” Patrick, the biggest victim of this all, said in a fatigued tone. “I hope you’ll refrain from making any more jokes.”

“I see, I’m sorry about that, mister. I didn’t think she would act that irrationally.” Lemn and Patrick both turned to look at me.

I thought this earlier as well, but do they think I’m someone who only cares about level grinding? I’m not.

Regardless of what they thought, the important thing right now was unlocking the level cap.

“So I need to defeat a god that’s...a higher rank than you, Lemn?”

“You haven’t given up yet...? Well, you’re right... There *are* gods that rank above me and have influence over all the countless parallel worlds. They would be caretakers of the tree. But those jerks rarely ever show their faces.”

“Jerks? Aren’t they technically, like, your bosses?”

“I might not be an exemplary god,” Lemn began after a short pause. “But the one thing I won’t stand is someone grouping me together with those jerks. You should also be wary of anything they say to you, if you ever talk to them.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m taking everything you say with a grain of salt too.”

“I guess there’s no harm in being cautious... But you shouldn’t say that to people’s faces, it’s hurtful.”

Perhaps unlocking the level cap wasn’t feasible. It seemed my chances of meeting a god ranking higher than Lemn were incredibly low.

But wait, didn’t Lemn say there were several methods?

“What are the other methods, besides defeating a higher being?”

“You’re really persistent.”

“What did you say?”

“Fine, I’ll tell you.”

It felt like we’d already had this exchange earlier as well. It was the boy’s fault for being so pretentious and withholding. Lemn began explaining the second method.

“Basically, you need to break free from being a single-world being. You just have to become the you of multiple worlds.”

“So I should take down my other selves in the parallel worlds?”

“Exactly. That doesn’t mean you have to defeat all the other versions of you though. Even if you take down just one and become a being straddling two worlds, the level-limiting shackles will come off.”

A battle royale of all the versions of me from parallel worlds, gathered together. The last me standing will reign as the strongest me. This is starting to sound like a death game. That in itself is making this whole thing feel unrealistic. I don’t know if I could kill another me, even if it was for level grinding...

“That seems unfeasible. I can’t kill someone just to level up.”

“What...? Weren’t you trying to kill me just moments ago?”

“You aren’t a human, you’re a god, so...”

Why is he asking a question with such an obvious answer? People and gods are completely different.

Le mn, who seemed to be deeply confused, turned to Patrick and signaled for help with his eyes.

“I don’t know either,” Patrick responded. “I thought I understood Yumiella’s moral values, but...”

“Are you really going to marry someone like *this*, mister? I think you should reconsider.”

“Well, that’s... I decided that I would look after her for the rest of our lives. There’s nothing I can do about it. I’ve given up, and I’ve made up my mind.”

I heard that, Patrick. You said you’re determined to stay by my side for the rest of our lives. Patrick just loves me so much. Jeez, what am I gonna do with you? It’s my fault that Patrick’s love has bloomed so much, to the point that I can’t accept it all. I’ll take responsibility. You’re really putting me in a hard spot here... This is bad. My mind was about to float away somewhere.

I set all my “troubles” aside for later—for now, I needed to get information from Lemn.

“Just asking for a friend, but how can one go to a parallel world?”

“What? You *still* haven’t given up?”

Both Patrick and Lemn looked exasperated.

And I even used the precautionary “asking for a friend” line...

If it was possible to open a portal to a parallel world, I would want to go. I would meet the parallel-world version of myself, and...I could think about what to do after that once I got there. I would want to make a choice that wouldn’t leave me with regret, after discussing things with my other self.

But, would the version of me in the parallel world truly be *me*? Would it be a *me* like my current self, where I had the memories of my past life, or would it be a *me* that was just Yumiella as she was in the game? The situation would be quite different depending on the kind of *me* that my parallel-world self was.

Regardless, all these what-ifs were nothing but empty speculation without actually being able to go to a parallel world. Judging from how Lemn had been acting, it didn’t seem that he could do something like open a portal to another dimension.

“Going to a parallel world... Yeah, I can’t do that.”

“I knew it,” I sighed.

“I can communicate with other versions of myself from parallel worlds to a certain extent, but I don’t think I can physically go between the worlds.”

That’s what I expected. I guess it’s impossible after all. My chances of meeting a higher being are slim, and I can’t meet myself from a parallel world. It feels like the ray of hope for my future has vanished.

“Is there any other way to unlock the level cap aside from those two methods?” I asked.

“You really can’t let this go, can you?”

“Well? Is there?”

“There could be,” Lemn began. “But I don’t know it.”

After letting my expectations soar, this god threw me into the depths of despair.

I was now faced with the hopeless truth that surpassing level 99 just wasn’t feasible. I hadn’t been this depressed since the time my favorite character wasn’t in the newest title of one of my favorite game franchises. I was just *that* shaken up.

I returned to my bed and slowly sat down, slightly sinking into the mattress as my heart sank even further. Patrick and Lemn took notice of the gloomy air around me, and appeared to be put off by how upset I was.

Just then, a cheerful voice that didn’t match the somber atmosphere rang out. It was Eleanora.

“Yumiella? Are you in your room?”

We had talked for quite a bit, to the point it was around the time that Eleanora, who always overslept, woke up. I got up and called out to the other side of the door.

“I’m in here.”

“I’m surprised to see you sleeping in, Yumiella.”

“I’ve been awake since early this morning. I just...”

Hold on. If Eleanora just came in right now she would see Lemn. I just know it’s going to be annoying to deal with. I can hear her surprised voice yelling, “What?! You had a younger brother this whole time, Yumiella?!”

I decided that we could take our time to deal with all of that after we’d finished talking to Lemn.

“Get into a shadow.” With that short command, Lemn moved right away. I was relieved that at the very least I wouldn’t have to slam him onto the floor again. As soon as he’d hidden away in Patrick’s shadow, which had been closest to him, the door opened.

“Breakfast will get cold if you... Oh my!” Eleanora covered her mouth with her hand and looked back and forth between Patrick and me as her face flushed.

Why is this happening? We definitely hid the black-haired god.

I was standing while Patrick was sitting in a chair—there shouldn’t have been anything strange about this sight. As I was perplexed by her strange reaction, Eleanora finally squeezed the words out in a quiet tone.

“Um... If you two are in the middle of something, I wish you would have just told me so.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I understand that the two of you are lovers, so you partake in *those* sorts of things, however... I do think you ought to be locking the door.”

“Um, it’s not what you’re thinking...” Eleanora had a huge misunderstanding about what was going on here. More than that, though, I was shocked to find out that she knew about “those sorts of things.”

No way, it’s not true. Whatever the wholesome, innocent Eleanora was imagining was completely different from what my sleazy mind was thinking. I would bet my soul on it. I’ll even throw in Patrick’s soul too.

“Anyways, it’s not what you’re thinking,” I repeated. “I was just talking with Patrick.”

“B-But, Yumiella! Dressing like that in front of a gentleman is a bit...”

Dressing like what?

I looked down to check what I was wearing, but it was just my usual pajamas: a top and bottom with polka dots, and a triangular nightcap. I had been in these clothes since I woke up. It was a perfectly normal outfit to sleep in...

“Is it that strange?” I asked.

“I’m saying that it’s disgraceful to be appearing before others in the clothes you sleep in. Also, I’ve never seen that kind of hat outside picture books.”

I see, so it’s bad to meet with the opposite sex in your pajamas. Though, I took out the trash in my pajamas plenty of times in my past life. Well, technically my pajamas were my high school tracksuit.

Clearing up this misunderstanding was too much of a hassle, and I still had things I wanted to talk to Lemn about. I decided to have Eleanora leave.

“My apologies. Well then, we’ll lock the door and get back to it.”

“G-Get back to it?!”

“Yes, we’ll be continuing what we were doing before. Would you like to stay and watch?”

“Wh— That’s, um, I... I! I will be heading out for a bit!” Just as I had expected, Eleanora’s face turned bright red, and she ran out of the room. She would usually take any opportunity to watch romantic scenes between us, but it seemed that this one was too stimulating.

After listening to her footsteps to confirm she was long gone, I closed the door, locking it just to be safe.

“That’s taken care of, then.”

“You might think you succeeded, but I think it’s just going to be more trouble for you later,” Patrick said.

“We can clear up the misunderstanding if you just deny it too.”

“I think it’s too late for that,” he grumbled, pressing his forehead.

If it bothers you that much you should’ve just denied it right then and there.

Anyways, I'll deal with Eleanora later. My main focus right now is the god of darkness.

I crouched down and spoke to my shadow. "Let's continue our conversation. You can come out now, Lemn."

"Did the young miss leave already?"

"The young miss...? Oh, you mean Lady Eleanora."

"Yeah, that young miss that's loved to the point of overprotection."

So I'm "miss," and Eleanora is "young miss." The two are hard to tell apart; maybe it was for the best that Eleanora left the room. Also, is it her father he's calling overprotective? It can't be me; I don't spoil her that much. All I want is to do everything I can to grant her wishes.

Anyways. What did I want to ask Lemn about? I need to first organize all the information I've gotten... All I can remember is stuff about leveling. I think before that Patrick asked a question... Right, now I remember. It was about the revival of believers in the god of darkness within Dolkness County. I can't just look the other way when a suspicious religion is forming in my county.

"How about we go to the place where Lemn's being prayed to?"

"Sounds good. Didn't you say you'd be building me a shrine, my priestess?"

"Excuse me? Why would I build something weird like that?" I had only ever said that because I had mistakenly thought that Lemn was a good god who presided over leveling. Now that I knew he was an evil god who dangled methods of unlocking level caps in front of people only to drop them from heaven into the depths of hell, I had no obligation to do such a thing.

I was standing there, ignoring Lemn hanging his head down, when Patrick stood up.

"Why don't we have breakfast before we go?"

"Sure. All right then, Lemn, get in the shadows."

"You're not going to feed me?"

"Lady Eleanora would see you, so no."

I was surprised to find out that even gods ate. When I was kicking and pressing Lemn into the floor, he'd felt more like a monster than a person. This was just speculation, but his body was probably almost entirely made up of magical energy.

Ryuu also ate food for pleasure, so perhaps it was natural for Lemn to ask for breakfast. But still, I wanted to avoid others in the mansion, including Eleanora, seeing Lemn. I had him hide in the shadows, and we headed to the dining room.

As I walked down the hallway alongside Patrick, Rita came walking from the opposite end.

"Good morning Lady Yumiella, Sir Patrick. Breakfast is ready, I was just on my way to escort you two."

"Morning, Rita. Is Lady Eleanora already eating?"

"Well... It appears that she has gone out without eating anything," Rita said as she glanced outside the window. I followed her gaze and saw that Ryuu, who was usually sunbathing at this time of day, was gone.

Eleanora said she was heading out for a bit, but I didn't expect her to go somewhere far. I was just hoping she'd keep her distance from my room... I think I overdid it.

"She must be so hungry out there... I wonder if she's all right."

"I believe her safety is guaranteed, as she took Ryuu with her."

"I'm sure she'll be fine with Ryuu there," Patrick said.

"You're right, she'll be okay since Ryuu's there." I nodded.

Our thoughts all aligned: it was dangerous for Eleanora to go out on her own, but we didn't have to worry if Ryuu was with her.

"I see, so the young miss isn't here. Then I guess I can come out." Intercepting the sunlight pouring in from the window, my shadow began to take shape as it spoke. Seeing the black-haired boy that appeared from my shadow along with the voice, Rita's eyes widened with shock as she froze.

"Oh, this kid is—"

“Good morning, Miss Maid. I’m the god of darkness, Lemn. You can just call me Le—”

“This kid is an evil god, so don’t listen to anything he says. Please warn everyone else in the mansion as well.”

“Yes, understood,” Rita responded, briskly walking away upon hearing my voice.

“Hey!” Lemn exclaimed, upset that I had interrupted him. “What are you going to do if people actually think I’m an evil god?! That maid is probably going to actually tell everyone that!”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about the small things. Oh, do you want breakfast?”

“I do!”

After teasing the construction of a shrine, I was treating him like an evil spirit. This was karma.

I’ll have you taste the same despair that you made me feel, I mused, but the moment I’d said I’d feed him breakfast, Lemn instantly cheered up.

This god is a sucker.

Interlude 1: Lemn

“The Holy Empire of Dolkness, huh? ...Hm?” Yumiella Dolkness muttered, only half awake. She shook her head against her pillow, a little confused by her own words, and furrowed her brow, dredging up the vague memory of the conversation she had been having in her dreams.

“She remembers,” Lemn the god of darkness said, his face souring into a look of displeasure. “It may be too much of a risk to gather information through her dreams. It appears I have no choice but to meet her in person.” It was rare to see Lemn without his perpetually affable smile.

For her part, Yumiella was focused on her attempt to recall the details of her dream, and she took no notice of Lemn’s presence. It was, after all, unsurprising that she would be unable to sense someone lurking inside her own shadow, as Lemn was now, observing her.



Le mn had first begun observing Yumiella ten years ago.

Long before her name had spread throughout the kingdom, Lemn—who was the god of darkness, but also managed dungeons—had sensed an abnormality. Dungeons aided the flow of magical energy in the world, kept dangerous monsters corralled in designated locations, and provided humans with useful magical instruments—in short, they played several important roles in the ecosystem of this world.

The dungeon in which Lemn had sensed an abnormality was one focused on sequestering exceptionally dangerous monsters; it was much too perilous a place for humans to go dungeon crawling. What awaited anyone foolish enough to enter this dungeon were ferocious dark-type monsters, nefarious fiends that hid in the shadows, and worst of all, a spirit of death called a Dullahan that lurked in the deepest level. Yet somehow, despite all of the danger, this impenetrable fortress had been cleared from top to bottom multiple times.

Such a feat might have been possible to complete just once. If one were aided by fighters as strong as the champions of old...perhaps at least four of them, with their incredible strength as well as the utmost preparation, it might then have been possible to clear this dungeon, especially if one of the champions in question were a user of light magic.

Even assuming it were possible to gather such champions, this team would be risking their lives—it would be a once-in-a-lifetime battle, with death the most likely outcome. As a god of darkness and dungeons, Lemn would have praised champions such as those, heroes worthy of legend that he'd never see the likes of again until the end of the world, whenever that end might come.

However, the dungeon in question, located in an area that humankind called Dolkness, had been cleared *multiple* times.

This is impossible! Lemn thought to himself. *No, this can't be right.* When he arrived to investigate, Lemn found no champions of light, no heroes of old, no one at all but a lone child. She was an expressionless girl who looked to be barely seven years old, sporting the same black hair and eyes he did.

The first time Lemn saw Yumiella, she was locked in combat, equally matched with the Dullahan. It was an intense battle, and Lemn, who wasn't very skilled at fighting, struggled to keep up with what was happening as an observer. The young girl appeared to always have the upper hand, consistently landing dark magic attacks on her opponent as she slowly wore it down, narrowly dodging the monster's attacks.

"Impossible..." Lemn murmured as he watched the battle unfold. "Is she really human?"

The young girl was incredibly out of place in the depths of a dungeon, and there was no doubt that she was a human. A completely regular human; moreover, a completely regular human *child*, barely geared and entirely alone. The unlikeliness of the situation bordered on the absurd.

If this girl were to continue in this way, she would eventually surpass the capabilities of a human—or rather, she might have already done so. If this was the extent of her strength, perhaps there wasn't a human alive who could stop

her if she were to go on a blind rampage outside a dungeon.

Similar thoughts swirled in his mind as Lemn continued to watch the battle, until there was a sudden change in the course of the fight.

“Hey, look out!” Lemn exclaimed reflexively, despite the fact that no one could hear him from his perch within the shadows.

The Dullahan, an imposing figure mounted on the back of a surging horse, swung its sword down from its position on high, and the blade grazed the girl. The great sword was several times longer than the child was tall, and even the smallest nick from such a large blade would have shortened her life. The resultant blow was a mortal one: the girl was knocked back by the attack, and she slammed into a stone wall before falling to the ground. Her right arm had been cut off at the shoulder.

“Oh no, it looks like she’s dead,” Lemn observed, a little dispassionately. “Hmm...maybe it was for the best.” Even though he was witnessing the death of a human child, the emotion that came over the god of darkness was something like relief. Upon consideration of a future in which this girl might grow up to become an enemy of the world, her dying here seemed like the best outcome.

Well then, let’s move on, Lemn thought. *Time to figure out how an anomaly like this girl came to be.* As he prepared to emerge from the shadow in which he’d been lurking, he felt something was off.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” he called out to the Dullahan. The headless knight was acting strange, still holding itself in battle-readiness, still sensing a threat. Lemn, as its kin, could tell how it was feeling—the Dullahan was afraid of something.

What would a monster that’s death itself have to fear...?

“That hurt a little,” complained a small voice. Lemn had been so certain that she’d breathed her last, yet still she spoke. Though he knew he wouldn’t be discovered, Lemn still found himself holding his breath from within the shadow.

“Ugh, it’s hard to walk without an arm,” she grumbled, glaring disapprovingly at her limbless shoulder.

The amount of blood she had lost was enough to kill her twice over. Even

now, the wound was spurting blood with every step she took. Although she griped that it was hard to walk, she still made her way closer to the Dullahan without stumbling. She took one step, then another.

“Oh, it feels like I’ve lost less blood than the last time I lost my left arm,” she observed thoughtfully. “I wonder if that’s because the heart is on the left side. But the angle of the cut was different this time, so I’m not sure...” As the girl continued her grotesque conversation with herself, something began to change.

The shoulder from which her arm was sliced off began to protrude, and her arm seemed to telescope back into place while letting out a horrendous sound. The blood that had spewed across the ground began moving of its own accord, merging into itself like an amoeba and gathering itself up towards her right arm as if it were being sucked back in by some invisible force. The girl lifted up her now completely regenerated right arm and pointed at the Dullahan. In the dark dungeon with her face covered in shadow, only the whites of her eyes and her teeth were visible, and they shimmered eerily.

“Hey, you, aren’t you a dungeon boss? Cut off your head and... Oh wait, you’re already headless. Never mind.”



“Ugh, just remembering it gives me the chills.” A cold shiver ran down Lemn’s back as he recalled the terrifying ferocity of seven-year-old Yumiella.

Ever since that slightly traumatic incident, Lemn had continually observed Yumiella. She had an immense power that could destroy the world—and as a god who looked after this world, it was only natural for him to be cautious of her.

In Yumiella’s dream the previous night, Lemn had asked her subconscious a question. He’d asked if she’d ever wanted to kill someone, or if she’d ever wished for the destruction of the world. Yumiella had answered a resounding “no” to both of these questions.

Immediately after answering, however, Yumiella’s consciousness had prepared to awaken. Her sleep had become shallower, and she’d begun to take notice of Lemn intervening in her dream.

“I wanted to at least figure out a weakness of hers, but oh well,” Lemn said with a shrug.

If he were to continue trespassing into the depths of her mind, he would be caught and rejected by the strength of her subconscious. If he wanted to keep influencing her, he’d have to assume that she had already taken notice of him and would recall his presence in her dreams after waking up, and then this knowledge would keep him from reentering her psyche in the future.

In questioning the depths of her mind, Lemn had confirmed that Yumiella had no evil intentions...for now, at least. Humans could change in the blink of an eye. Human feelings, after all, were endlessly changing, and rationality was a fragile thing.

“It’s not really about whether she *will* or not, but whether she *can* or not,” Lemn thought aloud.

Yumiella might not want to *do* anything evil, but she *could*. Not only that, but she could carry out a maximal act of evil—something so large that it would involve the entire world. If she were to act with malicious intent, she had enough power that the world could possibly end altogether.

“‘Possibly’...is an understatement. The possibility has already surpassed the realm of theory. After all, *I’ve already died*.” Lemn, whether or not he had been previously dead, was without a doubt currently alive, and so he began moving between shadows.

There was a reason that Lemn had finally decided to make contact with Yumiella after having limited himself to observing her for all these years. It was his job to protect the world using any means necessary, even if it meant he had to play dirty.

It was for this reason that Lemn was currently on his way to see another god, hoping to get her cooperation. She would understand why Lemn was so desperate. This god was, after all, Yumiella’s natural enemy.

“If I have her on my side, we can go up against Yumiella’s immense power.”

Leinn redoubled his determination to accomplish his goal, no matter what.

Chapter 2: The Hidden Boss Is Attacked by the God of Light

After finishing breakfast, Patrick, Lemn, and I left town and traced our way along one of the county roads. I had originally planned on asking Ryuu to take us to our destination, but unfortunately he was off traveling with a mildly traumatized Eleanora.

It's not like we're going that far, I reassured myself. *It's nice to take a walk like this every once in a while.* I had recently come to the understanding that when a man and a woman walked alongside each other, it could be qualified as “a date.” This meant that Patrick and I were, without a doubt, currently on a date.

But unfortunately for us, there was a voice projecting from the ground, interrupting what might otherwise have been a genuinely lovey-dovey event. “You’re on the right track! Looks like we’ll get there without getting lost.” Lemn was too lazy to walk, so he had once again slipped into my shadow.

“How wonderful,” I muttered through gritted teeth.

We were headed to the geographical location where faith in Lemn seemed to have been restored. The directions that Lemn had instructed us to follow were leading us to a farming community not too far from Dolkness Village.

It really is just a short walk away. I didn't think some strange new religion could have actually emerged this close to home...

As those thoughts crossed my mind, we arrived. In the middle of a vast barley field was a single settlement.

Oh, it's this town, I thought, as I recalled the last time I'd come by here for an inspection. During my prior visit, there had been a huge commotion about how I was the Mountain God, and it had been an awkward mess.

We came to a halt before the entrance to the settlement, and Lemn finally peeked out from my shadow.

“Come out already,” I said. “This is the place, right?”

“This village is a fine place to start,” he responded, a little ominously.

“To *start*?”

“It seems like faith in me has caught on in this whole area.”

“Does that mean faith in the god of darkness has spread to other villages besides this one?”

This is bad. This mysterious new force has been secretly expanding its power.

I stepped forward to enter the settlement, thinking I should start with gathering information from the people there, but Lemn started off in a completely different direction on his own.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“There’s a simple shrine this way,” he explained.

They have one of those now?

Patrick and I exchanged alarmed glances, and we quickly followed after him. We walked alongside the outer rim of the settlement, and roughly halfway around, we reached the side opposite to the county road, where a smaller path led us to a mountain.

This mountain, although it sat squarely within Dolkness County borders, was rarely visited by residents. Deep in the mountain was monster territory, and occasionally lost monsters would leave the mountainside and wander into human settlements. It was a dangerous place, this mountain.

It was also a place I’d frequented as a child.

“That’s it,” Lemn said, pointing. Sure enough, following the direction of his gesture led my gaze to a shrine-like structure made of stone with a minimalist aesthetic.

It was a tall, narrow boulder that was even taller than Patrick, shaped and refined into a holy object. A wooden structure had been built around the carved stone. It looked like constructing all of this had been a lot of work.

There were children from the village playing around the shrine. Their shrill

voices began to buzz with excitement upon seeing me.

“Wow! It’s the Mountain God!”

“No, it’s the countess!”

“Whoa, her hair really is pitch-black...”

Oh great, I’m still being called “the Mountain God.”

I had been spotted on occasion in the mountains when I’d done a lot of level grinding here as a child, and the villagers had taken me for a protective deity who took care of monsters for them. After I became the lord of Dolkness County, I’d traveled to many villages, including this one, and I thought I had cleared up the misunderstanding, but... It was all right in this case, though, because this gave me the perfect opportunity to gather information. Children were terrible at keeping secrets.

“Hey,” I called out to them, doing my best to sound casual. “Is this the shrine for the god of darkness?”

“Darkness?” one child echoed in confusion.

“Isn’t this the Mountain God’s shrine?” another asked.

“Wait, but the Mountain God does use darkness to take down monsters...” a third child chimed in.

It appeared that my question hadn’t really gotten through to them. In the language spoken in this world, the words for “darkness” and “mountain” were phonetically very similar, which I had found surprising, since this was also the case in Japanese—“yami” and “yama.” This phonetic similarity was probably the cause for their confusion.

Patrick, who had gone up closer to the shrine on his own, suddenly observed aloud, “This has ‘Mountain God’ carved into it.”

Huh? This isn’t a shrine dedicated to Lemn?

Baffled by this, I turned to Lemn, but he just stood there silently, tilting his head deliberately.

Man, this god is weirdly suspicious.

I decided to try talking to the village kids a bit more.

“Are there any other places where you pray to a god aside from here?”

“Pray to...?” The children seemed at a loss.

“Oh, um... How about a place where you go to ask a god for something, like this shrine?”

“There’s a shrine for Sanon in the village head’s house,” responded the polite boy, who looked to be the eldest in the group.

Sanonism, huh?

Sanonism, a religion dedicated to worshipping the god of light, Sanon, was a widespread faith prominent in this kingdom. The (unpleasant) memory of my battle with the light barrier at the Sanonist church in the Royal Capital was still fresh in my mind.

“Are there any other places?” I asked.

“I don’t think so...”

“I see. Sorry for taking up your time.”

The children looked at each other, confused. They all bobbed a quick bow in our direction before scampering back to the settlement.

It seemed like there wasn’t any faith in the god of darkness after all.

Why did Lemn say that faith in him had been restored, then...?

“Can you explain what’s going on here?” I demanded of him with a glare.

“This is just a theory, but...” Lemn began sheepishly, fidgeting in place. “I think...faith in you flowed into me instead.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, you know that the words for ‘mountain’ and ‘darkness’ sound similar, and on top of that, you also use dark magic. When the people of this village were praying to you, the Mountain God, they were maybe...inadvertently praying to me, the god of darkness as well. So it makes sense as to why the energy from their faith flowed into me through you. And that might also be why I mistook you for my priestess...”

What the hell? So the energy from believers flowed into Lemn because of phonetic similarities and the fact that we both use dark magic? He's a faith-thief! To steal the faith of my followers like that... Actually, though, now that I think about it, I don't really want that either. In fact, I wouldn't mind just giving him all of it.

"What... So that's all it was? A big, faith-based misunderstanding?"

"Ha ha," Lemn nervously laughed.

I wanted to go home. I gave Patrick a significant look before turning on my heel and quickly walking away.

"We're leaving now," I called over my shoulder at Lemn. "You'll have to walk on your own two feet this time."

"Hey, wait up!" Lemn protested, scrambling after us.

We walked back along the county road, heading away from the mountain village. It was before noon, and the sun was high in the southern part of the sky, which meant it was the time of day where shadows were the smallest.

Despite keeping up a litany of complaints, Lemn followed behind us the whole time. Each time he tried to come close and hitch a ride in my shadow, though, I would quicken my pace and create more distance between us.

"Is around here good?" I asked.

"Yeah," Patrick responded.

After getting the go-ahead from Patrick, we both turned and started heading north. This entire area was barren land—it was just pebbles scattered on the packed dirt and scrubby patches of weeds. There would be few shadows here.

"Huh? Where are we going?" Lemn asked, hustling to catch up with us. "This is off the main road."

Just as the words left his mouth, we both abruptly turned to face him. It was abundantly clear that Lemn was not being entirely truthful in his explanations, and Patrick and I had both picked up on it, which was why we chose to confront him here.

“I’d like you to tell us the truth,” I said.

“What are you talking about?” Lemn pasted on a smile. “I’ve only told you the truth, miss.”

“You said that faith in the god of darkness had only been restored *recently*, right?”

“That’s right...”

“But that the force of that faith was actually directed at the Mountain God... In other words, I was the cause of it. People started calling me the Mountain God because I was taking down monsters over ten years ago. These facts don’t add up unless faith in you began to reemerge at that same time, do they?”

“I didn’t realize I had made you so suspicious,” Lemn sighed. “That’s why you’ve positioned yourselves like this?”

He was correct to call us out. While we’d all been chatting, Patrick and I had oriented ourselves so that we stood to the north, while Lemn stood to our south. This meant that our shadows were cast towards the north, away from Lemn, making it that much more difficult for him to think of using them against us. The only power that we were certain Lemn could use was his ability to enter shadows, but there was a good chance he was hiding some other skills, so we couldn’t let our guard down.

“Don’t give me such an intimidating look,” Lemn said, flashing a carefree smile. “Entering shadows isn’t as convenient as you might think. I can only come out of the same shadow I entered, and there are a lot of constraints.”

“That’s a lie,” Patrick said confidently. “When Lady Eleanora came into Yumiella’s bedroom, you jumped into my shadow. But the next time you appeared, you came out of Yumiella’s shadow.”

“And here I thought I was being careful. That must mean you’ve been suspicious of me from the beginning.” Lemn turned to me. “Does that mean your interest in overleveling yourself was all an act to keep me talking, miss?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s exactly right...” I nodded, attempting to appear nonchalant. I tried to ignore the serious side-eye I was getting from Patrick at my bald-faced lie.

“So you must have been attacking me with dark magic to see what would be effective,” Lemn mused, oblivious to Patrick’s incredulity.

“That’s right...” I affirmed.

“Was the reason you kicked me immediately upon our introduction because you wanted to check if physical attacks worked?”

“I’m surprised you figured it out...”

Patrick was looking at me as if to say, “Are you kidding me?” but I paid him no mind. It was important to appear cool and collected in situations like these. Lemn certainly didn’t need to know the truth: I had kicked Lemn as a conditioned reflex, I was interested in leveling because that was my nature, and I had attacked Lemn with dark magic because I had lost control of myself.

“That’s also why you ordered that maid to disregard whatever I said,” Lemn added.

“Oh, that one is actually true.” I had only been *slightly* suspicious of Lemn at that point, but I’d made the right decision in telling Rita not to listen to him. This self-proclaimed god was much too suspicious a boy to be trusted.

Physical attacks were effective but dark magic wasn’t, and it was unclear how well magic of other elements would work against him. There was also a chance that he was hiding other abilities. Despite the fact that it was Patrick and I who had made the first move, Lemn still wore a carefree smile.

Wait, no. His smile is starting to look a bit strained. Despite his bravado, he might actually be at his limit.

Even so, we couldn’t let our guard down. Several seconds of silence passed before Lemn slowly raised both of his arms in a gesture of surrender.

“I give up,” he said. “There’s no way I can beat you two. I’ll tell you the truth.”

“How will you prove that what you’re telling us is actually the truth?” I asked skeptically.

“Well... Oh, why don’t you ask her? Looks like she just got here,” Lemn said, pointing to a seemingly empty area to our left.

I was about to ask if he was trying to distract us when something changed.

Out of nowhere, light began emanating from the spot towards which Lemn had pointed. Looking at the hot, white light made me think of the sun for some reason.

“What’s going on?!” I exclaimed. Reflexively, I covered my eyes to shield them from the overpowering brightness. Even though I couldn’t see him, I assumed that Patrick was doing the same.

After a few seconds, the light dimmed away. I gingerly opened my eyes, and then first checked for Lemn, who hadn’t, in fact, run away, and was instead standing in the same spot. I then cast my gaze towards the source of the light, where I discovered a girl who looked to be around my age. She had white hair and gold eyes, wore a simple white dress, and seemed to radiate divinity. Her hair was long enough to reach her hips and parted down the middle, exposing her forehead, and it was so blindingly white that it reflected the sunlight and shimmered.

Her eyes darted between me, Patrick, and then Lemn before she announced: “I am the god of light, Sanon. Yumiella Dolkness, I will eliminate you.” Her beautiful golden eyes stared right into mine.

Though the tone of her voice seemed calm and somewhat flat, I could feel an insurmountable rage in her words. She was furious with me.

The god of light should have no reason to be mad at me... Oh, but wait, maybe she does. I am, after all, the one who broke the barrier-producing magical instrument passed down as a holy relic in the church that reveres her. Also there’s all the stuff that went down with Alicia. But why would the god of light appear after all this time? The fact that she’s here now must mean it has something to do with Lemn.

As these thoughts ran through my mind, Sanon turned to regard the god of darkness. “What are you doing, Lemn?” she asked.

“Just taking care of some small things,” he said, snickering a little. “Why are you here?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?! We must do whatever it takes to eliminate Yumiella Dolkness.”

Wait, are their motivations unrelated?

While I stood there feeling confused, the situation continued to escalate. Sanon returned her attention to me, glaring daggers. “Yumiella Dolkness, I assume you are prepared?”

“You ask that, but...I’m not even sure why you’re upset with me. Did I do something wrong?”

“How shameless of you to ask such a question!” she cried out, enraged, her bare forehead glowing ominously. Light reflected off her forehead and bathed me in its baleful glow.

“Ow!” I yelled indignantly. “That hurts! That’s really painful!”

Every inch of my exposed skin, especially my face and my hands, throbbed with pain. I never could have imagined that light reflecting off a forehead could be used as a weapon. Unable to withstand a pain I’d never felt before, I fell to the ground and rolled around.

The last time something hurt this bad was...when Alicia stabbed me. This hurts more than it did to punch that light barrier.

I could faintly see Patrick, who had hurried over to my side.

“Yumiella?! Are you all right? What happened?!”

“It looks like this is the end for me... I’ll leave the rest to you, Patrick...”

“Yumiella!” Patrick exclaimed, taking me into his arms. His voice gradually faded into the distance.

I’m so glad he’s okay... But why did that terrible light leave him unaffected?

I was so curious that I couldn’t stand it. I sat up abruptly, dusting the dirt off my clothes as I asked him, “Didn’t that hurt? That...forehead light?”

“You seem totally fine,” he accused.

I’m not fine; that actually really hurt. I’m just lucky that the incredible pain went away immediately. I’d hate if that light were to shine on me for all eternity, though. What exactly was that forehead beam? Was it light magic that targeted me directly?

I was about to question the girl, who still stood there glaring at me, but there was a scream from beside me. I looked over to see that Lemn had fallen to the ground. His body was slightly translucent, as if he were fading away.

“I can’t take it anymore,” Lemn groaned. “I’m going to die.”

True, why wouldn’t he be the one most affected? Patrick was completely unaffected, I was a little bit inconvenienced, and Lemn is on the verge of disappearing. This is definitely an effect of the element of light. Light is the natural enemy of darkness. As weird as it is to think that the reflection from her forehead could carry the power of light magic, she is the god of light, after all.

I hid behind Patrick before a second forehead beam could be shot. I tentatively poked my head out from behind my fiancé and asked, “Are you sure you aren’t mistaken? I really can’t think of anything that I might have done to anger you...”

“Do you honestly think that?!” Sanon shrieked in rage. “After making a decision that changed the course of someone’s life?!” Her forehead glimmered again, but I hid too late, and the light hit me right in the face.

“Agh! It really hurts. Just my face hurts.”

It appeared that Sanon produced the light from her forehead as an emotional response.

I’ll have to be gentle. I’ll talk to her in a friendly way and figure out what her deal is, like we’re friends in the same grade. I was a dazzling high schooler at one point in my past life; I just have to unearth those memories!

“What’s up, Forehead Bestie?” I hit Sanon with my friendliest smile. “It’s giving big mad vibes... Why don’t we get some boba and chill? ...Uh, Forehead Bestie?”

“‘Forehead Bestie’?! Are those words in reference to me?!” Forehead Bestie’s forehead shone forth once again, but this time I had the presence of mind to hide behind Patrick. And thank goodness, because that beam felt like it had been the brightest of them all. If that had hit me, I would’ve been knocked out, no cap.

I guess talking like a trendy teen didn’t work. I hadn’t been that kind of high

schooler anyways, so I guess it's hardly surprising. I've never even had boba.

As I pondered my next plan, Patrick looked at me seriously and asked, "Yumiella, what's wrong? Did you become even crazier after getting hit with too much light?"

"That was a plan... Wait, what do you mean by 'even crazier'?"

"What should we do? Should we run for now?" He was ignoring my question.

Running was an option, but Sanon could probably accurately determine our location wherever we went. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to appear at exactly the right spot in such a remote area. Even if we were to flee, she would probably just catch up to us right away—we had no choice but to face her.

"Running won't solve anything," I whispered. "Don't worry, leave it to me."

"That's what I thought you'd say, but...be careful. What should I do?"

"Watch from here."

After finishing our huddle, I swiftly sidestepped into the open from behind Patrick and stalked towards Sanon. Surprised by my boldness, Patrick moved to follow, but I held up my hand to stop him.

"Did you say your goodbyes?" Sanon smirked. "I must say, I'm impressed that you didn't run."

"Do I look like the kind of person who would just sit there and wait to die, Forehead Bestie?"

"'Forehead'... There you go again with that name!" Sanon's forehead gleamed once more, but I continued my dogged advance, stubbornly bearing the pain of Sanon's light.

"How is Yumiella enduring the power of that light?!" Patrick exclaimed from behind me, clearly shaken.

Sanon doesn't look shocked, but I'm sure she's secretly surprised. I hope she's surprised. I need her to be surprised, or else I'm in big trouble.

With great effort, I maintained the pretense that I was unaffected and kept

moving, even though it hurt, even though it *really* hurt. This was my plan: just grin and bear it. It didn't seem as reckless as my usual plans; after all, the forehead beam did nothing but cause pain. It didn't alter my ability to keep fighting, so as long as I endured the discomfort, I could just ignore it.

I passed the semitransparent Lemn on my march towards Sanon.

I'm the hidden boss, I reminded myself. On an individual basis, I'm the strongest character in this game. There's no way I'm losing to some afterthought character who showed up out of nowhere.

"That light doesn't work on me," I said with a confidence meant to both disconcert Sanon and bolster myself. "Did you think you could beat me in a fight?"

"Yumiella Dolkness... Your bravado is misplaced." Sanon gave me an exceedingly exasperated look and continued. "This light is nothing but the manifestation of my own immaturity. It is merely extraneous power spilling out of me due to my carelessness. It is just a minuscule amount of my true strength seeping out."

I blinked in confusion. "What?"

"Do you think you can win against me, when you're in so much pain after being hit with such a trivial amount of my power?"

"Does that mean you can use even stronger light magic...?"

Huh? Have I bit off more than I can chew here?

Though I was renowned for my impenetrable defenses against both physical and magic attacks, light magic was my single vulnerability. It was a much bigger deal than a quadruple weakness.

"The light shining from me until this moment barely even qualifies as magic. Now then, why don't I give you a preview of my true powers?" Sanon smiled beatifically. "...*Light.*"

This is bad. I can feel my entire body seizing up. My intuition is telling me that I'll die if this keeps up.

I sensed something ruinous, and I snapped my head up, but all I saw was the

sun... No, there were two suns. The other was...

“Oh, shoot!” I kicked off from the ground with all my might and jumped straight backwards, almost at the same time that a dense beam of light bloomed where I had been standing. The light seemed concentrated to its utmost limit, and from my relatively safe distance, it looked like a pillar that pierced the heavens. I could tell that even the aftershocks would be deadly.

It might prove to be a waste of time, but I decided to cast *Shadow Lance* and cover the entire area to shield myself, but when I scanned my surroundings, I couldn't find a single shadow I could use as a catalyst for the spell.

All right, who led me to such a barren place with nothing to hide behind?

This was it. The aftershock from the pillar of light was going to hit me, and I was probably going to die. Even if I did survive it, it was definitely going to do some serious damage.

All of these thoughts flashed through my mind in the instant I flung myself into the air. I used the powerful momentum of my jump to land on the ground and shield myself by curling up in an attempt to decrease my targetable surface area. I gritted my teeth and shut my eyes.

Do it quickly. God bless.

“Hm...?” Several milliseconds had passed, but there was no pain. Did my soul leave my body before I even felt the pain?

I cautiously opened my eyes and saw pitch-black. Wondering where I was, I reached out and felt cold dirt.

This is... They must have thought I was dead and buried me. An opportunity like this doesn't come around very often, so I should take advantage of it and pretend I'm a zombie when I go out. It's important to treasure these kinds of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.

I thrust out both arms straight up at a right angle to my body and sat up, arms still extended. It appeared that my grave was shallow, and I was able to reach the surface just by sitting.

“Graaagh,” I moaned. I squinted in the sudden brightness while I scanned my surroundings. This wasn’t a graveyard.

Patrick and Sanon were facing one another, the air around them crackling with power. Lemn had faded further, now even more transparent than your average ghost.

Of course not enough time would have passed for anyone to bury me.

Patrick glanced back at me for a moment before quickly returning his attention to Sanon. “Why did you come out?!” he scolded me over his shoulder.

Oh, I see. He deployed earth magic in order to protect me. Even now, he’s standing before the god of light and protecting me. It’s probably not the time to be acting like a zombie. But please, let me just have this one thing.

“Itchy... Tasty...” I groaned.

“What?” Patrick asked distractedly.

“Don’t worry about it,” I assured him. “I’m satisfied now.” Still covered in dirt, I abandoned my grave and made my way to Patrick’s side.

Patrick stepped forward as if to shield me and said, “You’re at too much of a disadvantage. You should run.”

“What if I told *you* to run, because she’s only after me...?”

“No way,” he insisted. “I’m not running.”

“Exactly.”

You could say that Sanon was my deadliest enemy, but that was no reason to leave everything to Patrick. In addition, that pillar of light seemed to have the energy of a powerful laser, creating between us and Sanon a perfect circle of red-hot, melted slag where there had once been rocks and sand. Even though Patrick wasn’t harmed by the forehead beam, he wouldn’t come out unscathed after getting hit with heat like that.

“I knew you wouldn’t run...” He sighed deeply. “I guess it can’t be helped.”

“What should we do? Does it look like your magic will work against her?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure your dark magic probably won’t have much of an

effect.”

“Okay, I’ll be in the vanguard, then.”

“Got it. I’ll support you with magic from behind, so hit her with a heavy blow.”

If magic wouldn’t work, then using my physical strength to punch her was the way to go. Patrick would create cover for me with his earth magic as I closed in on her, and from there it would be a melee match.

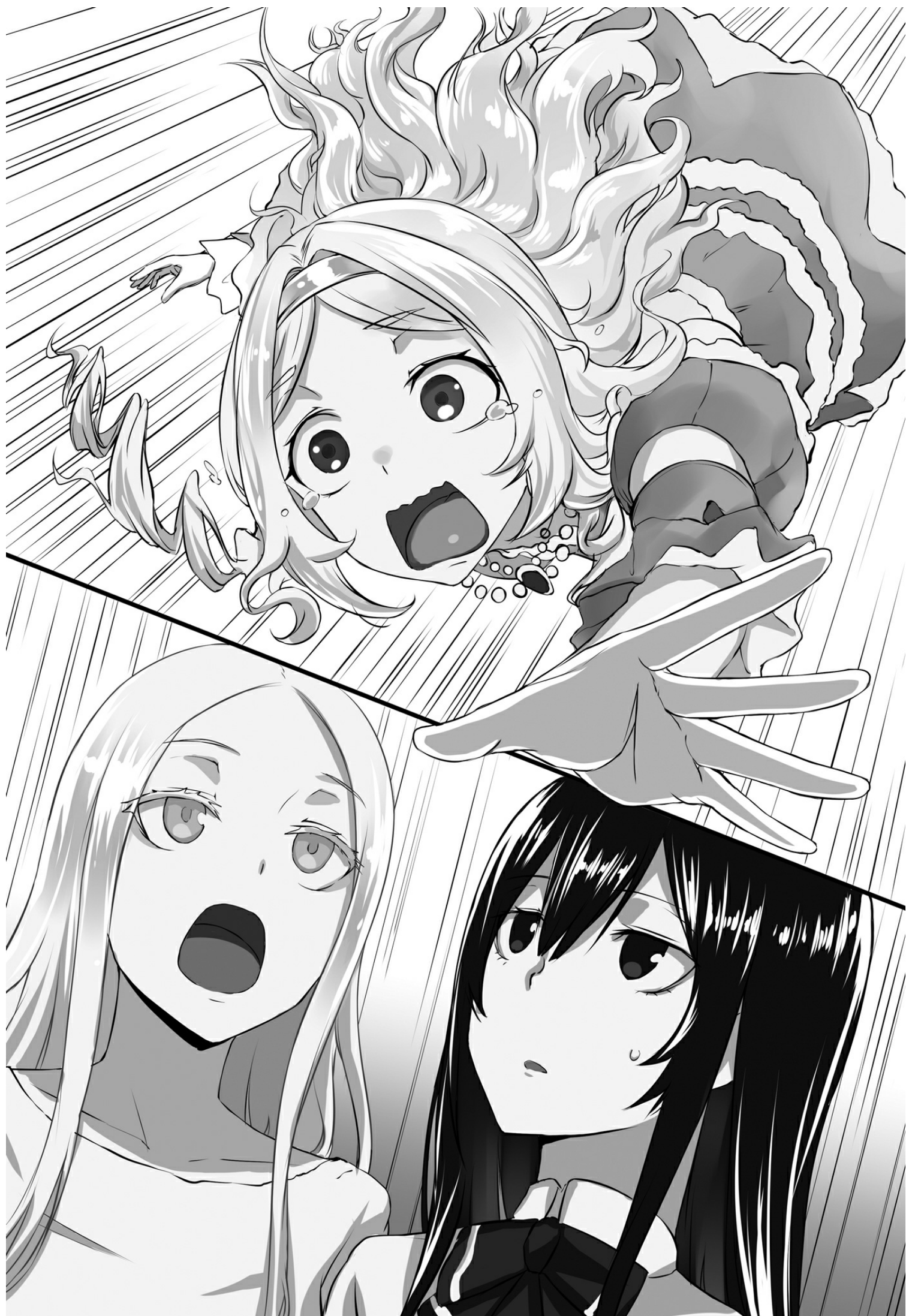
Is this going to work? I chewed my lip. I want one more thing, just one more advantage. Something that would distract Sanon, like a rock falling from the sky... Nah, there’s no way that could happen.

Sanon narrowed her golden eyes at us and lifted her arm in a threat or a benediction. “There is no way you will be able to defeat me. Surrender now, and—”

“Aaaah!” A scream echoed from above us, interrupting Sanon’s words. It was a familiar voice. Unexpectedly, Sanon reacted by turning all of her attention to the voice at once.

“That sound...?!” She turned away from us and craned her neck at the sky. This was my chance, but before I was able to make my move, Sanon turned back to me. “Yumiella Dolkness! Do whatever it takes to catch her! Eleanora is falling from the sky!”

“Excuse me? Lady Eleanora? Falling from the sky?” Despite my skepticism, Sanon sounded legitimately desperate, so I took the risk and looked up as well, scanning the sky for the source of the voice. It was a girl, her long, blonde hair streaming behind her, the skirts of her dress flapping with the momentum of her fall. Her ringlets, her most distinctive feature, had been undone by the wind. It was definitely Eleanora. Why was she falling from the sky?



“Aaaah!” Eleanora screamed.

“Oh, it really is Lady Eleanora,” I said, unable to keep the surprised admiration from my voice.

“Now is no time to be impressed!” cried Sanon. “My physical abilities will not be enough to catch her. Hurry!”

“You say that, but maybe you’re going to attack—”

“I promise that I will not!” Sanon yelled, her forehead glistening in a way that belied her statement. It was the shiniest glimmer so far. Caught off guard because of this Eleanora-based distraction, I failed to dodge the forehead beam.

“Ow, ow, ow.”

“Oh no! I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Sanon apologized, covering her forehead with her hands.

While we were wasting time with this pointless conversation, Eleanora was still coming closer to the ground. I wasn’t sure why the god of light was concerned for her safety, but if the forehead beams kept up, things wouldn’t turn out well for me either. Sanon gave me a beseeching look, but still I did nothing. Sanon wasn’t the right person to save Eleanora, but neither was I.

“Patrick!”

“I know,” he responded. Patrick raised one arm towards the sky, slowing Eleanora’s descent. It was his wind magic—it wasn’t visible, but she was currently engulfed in an upward gust of wind. She would safely land at a bit of a distance from us.

I let out an internal sigh of relief, thinking that everything had been handled, but Sanon’s mind didn’t seem to be at peace.

“Well done, Patrick Ashbatten! Yumiella Dolkness, hurry up and catch Eleanora!”

“She’s fine now,” I reassured the god of light. “She’ll have a gentle landing without a single scratch on her.”

“How can you be so unconcerned?! Though it might be a slow fall, she will still tumble to the ground!”

Huh? Am I in the wrong here? Worried, I turned to Patrick, but he tilted his head in confusion as well. *Right, I’m not doing anything wrong.*

Despite the fact that we clearly had everything under control, Sanon covered her forehead with both hands and pleaded, “Please, you’re the only one who can save Eleanora.”

“Like I said...” I began, but I reconsidered. “Fine,” I sighed. Sanon’s pleas were so intense that it was as if she were begging me to save the world, so I did as she asked and went to catch Eleanora.

I launched into a running start and jumped, catching Eleanora in my arms just as she had descended to roughly the height of the second story of a building. From there, I fell freely and landed gracefully on both feet. Eleanora was completely unscathed, and as if to prove it, she was still letting out an energetic scream. I regretted that my arms were otherwise occupied, because it would have been a blessing to cover my ears.

“Aaaah! I’m falling!” Eleanora screeched.

“Um, we’re already on the ground,” I pointed out.

“Oh...? Yumiella? Am I all right?” Eleanora looked around and finally realized that she had been saved.

“How in the world did you end up falling like that?” I complained to the princess who had arrived from the sky, making me feel like I’d accidentally strayed into a certain film. I gently let her down to stand on her own.

“I thought I was going to die...” Eleanora’s legs were trembling like a fawn’s. She stumbled a bit, and I rushed to support her.

I wasn’t sure what had happened to her, but she must have had a terrifying experience. Even though my body could likely withstand reentry into the atmosphere, I knew how scary it was to fall from that kind of height back from my early days of dragon flight. I gave Eleanora a tight hug to reassure her that she was safe now, that I would protect her no matter what kind of danger came her way.

“Woo-hoo! Being alive is truly incredible!”

“You’re fine, aren’t you...?”

“Not only am I perfectly well, I also received a hug from you,” Eleanora bubbled. “Perhaps I should fall from the sky more often!”

“Yeah, you’re all right.”

Even though she’s physically weak, her mental strength is incredible. I’d forgotten about that.

Even if we were both girls, it still felt awkward to be clinging onto her for too long. Just as I was about to let go, a voice called out from beside me.

“You’re touching Eleanora too much! Get away from her this instant!”

I turned to find Sanon right there, much too close for comfort, still covering her forehead with both hands. First I had to protect Eleanora, and now I had to stay away from Eleanora? What a lot of unreasonable demands. In this case, however, I had been planning on doing what she was asking for to begin with, so I complied and stepped away.

Eleanora seemed to be disappointed, but her footing was stable now. She turned to Sanon and said, “Oh? Who is this? I feel like we’ve met somewhere...”

“This is our first time actually meeting. It’s a pleasure, Eleanora.”

“Oh, that voice! You’re that god! You’ve actually come!”

“We’ve only been speaking until now, but I’m happy to be finally seeing your face.”

Eleanora was so religious that she had continued going to the Sanonist church even after she moved from the Royal Capital to Dolkness County... Wait, was she actually religious? I’d never bothered to ask. Regardless, there was no doubt that she had a passionate interest in Sanonism.

Even so, I had no idea that she’d ever talked to a god. I had thought hearing the voice of god was impossible until this morning when I met Lemn.

Right, now I remember! Yesterday, Eleanora was saying that she could hear a

god's voice. She said she heard a voice telling her to be careful around me. So it wasn't an auditory hallucination after all.

Sanon seemed to be pleased to be talking to Eleanora. Perhaps she couldn't control her joy, because there was light spilling out from the gaps between her fingers that covered her forehead. There was a serious possibility that I would be hit with the forehead beam again if I went close enough to join in the conversation, but I decided to take the risk.

"I heard about your prophetic message to her yesterday," I said. "You told Lady Eleanora to be careful around me."

"Yes, that's correct," Sanon confirmed, turning to me. She regarded me with a strict glare. "You must keep your distance from Eleanora, Yumiella Dolkness."

I can't just roll over and say, "Yes." I've already promised that I'm going to provide for Eleanora for the rest of her life.

"Can you tell me the reason? Lady Eleanora is my dearest best friend."

"There are many reasons... First of all, you are a bad influence on Eleanora. Also, she may be your best friend, but above all, she's my precious follower."

"I won't be a bad influence," I protested. "You sound like a certain overprotective father I know, Sanon. Also, she's not my best friend, she's my *dearest* best friend."

"Not a bad influence? Aren't you the reason why Eleanora fell out of the sky just now? Also, allow me to point out that I've known Eleanora far longer than you have, though yesterday was the first time we spoke."

I was being accused of a crime I hadn't committed. I would never do something to make Eleanora fall from the sky. I turned to Eleanora, thinking she could clear things up, but she was just standing there looking blissfully oblivious. Wondering where her brain had wandered off to, I leaned in to hear her mumbling to herself. Sanon did the same.

"Hee hee, I'm her dearest friend..." Eleanora sighed happily. "I even get to talk to a god, this is like a dream come true..."

"Adorable," I cooed. "She's my dearest friend."

“Adorable,” echoed Sanon. “She’s my dearest follower.”

That’s hardly a match. If you have to choose between a god and your best friend, your best friend is the obvious winner, I thought to myself as I basked in my superiority. I looked at Sanon to see her inevitable look of defeat, but instead, I found a prideful look on her face.

We need to decide who gets to have Eleanora... But before that, to bolster my case, I should clear up this little misunderstanding about her unfortunate fall.

“Lady Eleanora, why did you fall from the sky?”

“I was flying on Ryuu’s back, when—”

“See!” Sanon interrupted Eleanora triumphantly. “Your dragon is the cause for this after all. That means it’s your fault, Yumiella Dolkness!”

I see, so Eleanora fell off Ryuu’s back... I guess I should take responsibility for this as Ryuu’s guardian.

“I was flying through the clouds, when suddenly a pillar of light appeared!” Eleanora continued. “It was so very close to us! When the light shone on his scales, Ryuu seemed hurt, and he started thrashing around... That was when I was shaken off.”

The pillar of light must be the one Sanon used to attack me. So she’s the culprit behind the mystery of Eleanora’s descent from the sky. Not only that, but her attack hurt Ryuu too.

Since Ryuu was a dark-type like me, he was probably quite injured. Even if nothing but the attack’s aftershock had hit him, that pillar of light was incredibly potent.

I squinted up at the sky to see if I could catch sight of him and assure myself that he was all right, and...there he was. Ryuu was watching us, circling above. He seemed to be flying normally without any irregularities in his wingbeats—he was likely just surprised by the pain. Our eyes met, so I gave him a little wave to let him know that Eleanora was safe, and that he could stay away if he was scared.

Then I turned back to the true culprit, Sanon. “The person who created the

pillar of light is at the most fault here.”

“No, but...” Sanon sputtered. “If Eleanora hadn’t ridden the dragon in the first place, then...”

“You’re the god of light! Aren’t you ashamed to be making excuses?” I postured like a mafioso.

“But, I...” Sanon sadly hung her head. I took a step closer, hoping to push my advantage, but Eleanora stepped between us.

“Yumiella! It isn’t right to bully a god!”

“Hey,” I complained. “I’m not actually bullying her.”

“Eleanora!” Sanon exclaimed, touched. “I knew I could count on my follower to defend my honor!” Sanon seemed to immediately regain confidence knowing that Eleanora was on her side. She came forward as if it were her turn to attack and closed in on me, her forehead shining. “Like I keep saying, you need to keep your distance from Eleanora. Do you think you can win against my light?”

“But, God, I don’t want to be away from Yumiella!” Eleanora protested.

“Lady Eleanora!” I beamed. “I knew I could count on my dearest best friend!”

Eleanora turned around to face Sanon.

I knew it; she was on my side after all. Not only that, but she’s giving me a good spot to hide, and she’s protecting me from the forehead beam.

The god of light immediately deflated, and the glimmer from her forehead disappeared as if it were on a dimmer switch. “I’m just thinking of what’s best for you, Eleanora...” she said sadly.

“Even if it’s a command from a god, I don’t want to say goodbye to my friend.”

“How could this be? I thought you would understand... Eleanora, I just...” Sanon’s eyes looked empty, and her demeanor, if it was possible, had become even stranger.

Sensing danger, I stepped back in front of Eleanora and looked askance to see where Patrick had ended up. He was behind Sanon, ready to launch into a

pincer attack with me at a moment's notice.

If it comes to it, I'll help Eleanora escape while Patrick stalls Sanon.

As Patrick and I communicated all of this through significant glances, Sanon suddenly began to cry, large droplets running down her face in torrents.

"I see that you're going to choose Yumiella Dolkness, Eleanora... You're going to marry Yumiella Dolkness and spend the rest of your lives together... I don't approve, I won't approve of it..."

Huh? I'm marrying Eleanora? No, I'm not(?).

I wasn't exactly sure how she had arrived at this conclusion, but Sanon was convinced that Eleanora and I were getting married. I was wondering if Sanon was a little touched in the head, since I couldn't think of another reason that she would be spouting such nonsense. It had to be a misunderstanding, or maybe someone had lied to her, but just the thought of me and Eleanora getting married was ridiculous.

"Um... We aren't getting married," I said, deciding to see if a simple denial would set things straight.

"What?" Sanon blinked in confusion.

"Lady Eleanora and I would never get married, because we're both women. Though, to be clear, I have nothing against people getting married to whomever they like."

"Is that true...?"

"It's the truth," Eleanora chimed in. "Yumiella and I are simply best friends."

Once both of us had denied the marriage allegations, Sanon's tears dried up at once. Her expression returned to life as a shining grin spread across her face. A more literal shine followed from her forehead, so I quickly hid behind Eleanora, trying to make myself small.

"I see, is that so?" Sanon seemed eager to confirm our complete lack of an engagement. "That must mean Eleanora wasn't violated by this despicable individual after all."

I feel like I've had this conversation with someone before. The way in which we

fought over Eleanora earlier felt familiar too. I wonder why.

I peeked out from behind Eleanora to confirm that the forehead beam had calmed down, and seeing that it had, I asked, “Why did you think that Lady Eleanora and I were going to get married?”

“You were the one who said it,” Sanon replied.

“What? When was that?”

“It was yesterday. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

Yesterday, yesterday... Hmm... So much has happened since this morning that yesterday feels like a million years ago. I know for a fact that yesterday morning, Eleanora said she could hear the voice of a god. And now it’s been revealed that the voice was Sanon’s, warning Eleanora to be careful around me. Completely unaware of that fact, I assumed that Eleanora was mentally unstable and having auditory hallucinations... I was deeply touched by what a good girl she was, so then I said I would marry her so that I could provide for her for the rest of her life... Oh wait, I did totally say that. I said I’d marry Eleanora. Right, that was the reason why we went to see her father. I remember now.

“I guess I did say that...” I finally admitted after a short silence.

“I heard it clearly,” Sanon agreed. “That’s why I ran over here, so I could protect Eleanora.”

“The reason I said it at all was because I also wanted to protect Lady Eleanora. I thought she was having hallucinations and hearing things, so if you think about it that way, this whole misunderstanding is actually your fault, Sanon.”

“Wh-What? No, you can’t pretend this is my fault when you’re being the strange one, bringing up marriage out of nowhere.” I had hoped that Sanon would be swept along by the force of my argument and accept defeat as she did when we had discussed who was at fault for Eleanora’s unfortunate descent from the sky, but instead, Sanon continued to assert that I was at fault. To be fair, I thought the offer of marriage had been strange as well—I had been acting uncharacteristically odd yesterday.

Once all of the facts had been brought to light, the whole thing seemed completely absurd. I never would have guessed that the greatest danger I’d

ever face would be caused by an offhand comment that got way out of hand. The ludicrous nature of the situation seemed to be sinking in for Sanon as well. Although we had been dire enemies until several moments ago, we now gave each other a look and sighed.

But...can I really let it end like this? Things got muddled after Eleanora fell from the sky, but Sanon had a clear advantage when we fought directly. At best it was a draw. There's no way that I, Yumiella Dolkness, would be okay without seeing this battle through to the end.

I readied myself. "Well then, let's start round two."

"Excuse me?" Sanon asked, confused.

Unlike before, we were standing much closer to each other—close enough that if I took one step forward and reached out, I would be able to touch her. She had decimated me with her long-range attacks, especially that forehead beam, but now we were in melee range.

Sanon also said she wasn't able to catch Eleanora when she was falling from the sky. How careless of her to expose her physical weakness. I can definitely win in hand-to-hand combat.

I kicked off from the ground and leaped forward. I slid past Sanon on her side and slipped behind her, strategically removing myself from forehead-beam range.

"She disappeared?!" Sanon exclaimed.

"I'm behind you."

"Eek!"

Unable to see my movements, Sanon had left herself wide open. I reached around from behind her, grabbed both of her wrists, and fell backwards. Naturally, Sanon fell with me. When I hit the ground first, I shifted my weight to bring both of my legs up and around, locking them behind Sanon's knees, tangling our legs.

Nailed it, I thought smugly. With Sanon's wrists held tight in my hands and her legs locked in mine, I used my remarkable strength to lift her body up above

mine, positioning her in a way that made her look like a bridge, helplessly suspended over me. *This is the surfboard, also known as—*

“Oh my! Yumiella’s Romero Special has landed!”

Nice commentary, Lady Eleanora.

Our eyes met, and I gave her a small nod to show her I was proud of her. I wasn’t sure when he’d gotten over there, but I noticed that Patrick had moved to stand by Eleanora’s side. I was happy to see that he was clearly preparing to add his own analysis of my rematch with Sanon. Sports commentators should always come in pairs!

“Lady Eleanora, what did you just say?” he asked, looking at her with surprise.

“Why, it’s commentary, of course!” Eleanora looked very pleased with herself. “Yumiella also taught me the names of many wrestling moves.”

“It might not be such a mischaracterization to call Yumiella a bad influence...” Patrick muttered, which didn’t seem like useful commentary to me.

I was about to refute his claim, but that’s the moment that Sanon chose to begin thrashing around in my grip. Unfortunately for her, she was much too weak to make much headway. Even her specialty, the forehead beam, was doing her no good; unable to escape my surfboard hold, she was shooting the beam towards the sky, leaving me without a scratch.

Sanon gave up on breaking away from my restraint by force and began making a commotion instead. “Hey! Yumiella Dolkness! Put me down!”

“How is it?” I taunted. “Does the Romero Special hurt?”

“It’s more embarrassing than it is painful... Wait, that’s not the point! You must stop this immediately!”

“The proper method to do this move is actually when you force your opponent to roll face down and onto their knees, and then you can flip them over...” I started to explain, and then I brought myself up short. “Oops, I’m doing the analyst commentary. That’s your assignment.” I gave Patrick a significant look to indicate that he was really falling down on the job, but his face had twisted into an incredible grab bag of emotion. He wore an expression

that was a melting pot of feelings—sorrow, wrath, resignation, self-depreciation, woe, regret, anxiety, concern, pensiveness, and fluster.

Oh no, I might have overdone it just a bit. I thought I was being so careful by not using the Muscle Buster on Sanon, but it looks like the Romero Special was a no-go too. I've learned my lesson: I'll only use a German Suplex from now on.

It suddenly felt uncomfortable to continue with our rematch, so I released Sanon by throwing her off to one side. As she stood up, I noticed tears in her eyes, and I unexpectedly began to feel like I had done something wrong.

She's the one who picked a fight with me. This was all self-defense.

"I was almost killed because of a misunderstanding," I pointed out, "so you'll forgive something like this...right?"

"I admit that I was at fault for the root cause of our conflict, and for that I apologize. But to face such incredible humiliation..."

"Was my Romero Special that embarrassing...?"

"Don't make me say it!" Sanon cried. "Also, you say you were almost killed, but I had no intention of causing you permanent damage."

What? I feel like the pillar of light she attacked me with was overflowing with murderous intent. Isn't it a bit of a stretch to say that was anything but intended to kill me?

"Even I would've been in trouble if I'd been hit by that pillar of light you threw at me," I pointed out.

"I just wanted you to learn your lesson after you deceived Eleanora..." Sanon huffed. "I take care to not feel anything special towards specific humans. I do not have a particular affinity for Eleanora, nor do I dislike you, Yumiella Dolkness."

Though she said all this with a straight face, I just couldn't find it in myself to believe her. She totally hated me, and she definitely adored Eleanora. But I was finally able to figure out why this all seemed so familiar—speaking to Sanon was just like talking to Eleanora's father.

"I'm not sure why you're trying to hide your undeniable affection for her, but

it's completely obvious."

"That is simply not the case. I am the god of light, Sanon. The sun's light shines down onto everyone equally."

Ugh, this really was such a ridiculous situation. All that happened in the end was that the Eleanora fan club gained a new member.

Looking back on the events of the past twenty-four hours, I could start to tease out a clearer picture of the path that had led us here. I recalled that directly after our discussion about marriage and whatnot, Eleanora had heard a voice saying, "I don't approve, I'll be there right away." Now I knew that voice had to have been Sanon's. Still, it felt like she'd taken too long to get here.

"Why did it take a whole day for you to get here when you told Lady Eleanora that you'd be here right away?" I asked.

Sanon was silent for a moment, then explained, a little hesitantly, "I can appear freely anywhere the sun is shining. However, since it was cloudy yesterday—"

"Wasn't it sunny yesterday?" I interrupted.

It definitely was. I don't think we had clear blue skies, but the sun was definitely out.

Sanon averted her gaze as if she was hiding something when suddenly Lemn popped up beside her.

Oh, he's alive. I thought the forehead beam had killed him and he'd melted away.

Lemn smirked. "Knowing Sanon, she probably spent too much time trying to figure out what to wear, and then a day had passed before she knew it."

"N-No, you're wrong!" Sanon exclaimed, desperately attempting (and failing) to refute his theory.

Ah, Forehead Bestie is bad at lying. She's the opposite of Lemn, who nonchalantly tricks people while wearing that affable smile.

Catching sight of the suddenly visible god of darkness, Eleanora shrieked in surprise. "What?! Who is that?! Yumiella, is that...your younger brother?"

“I don’t have a brother,” I said patiently.

“Then... Is he your *child*?!” Eleanora’s assumptions seemed to be running off in a ridiculous direction, just because Lemn had black hair like mine.

I knew this would happen. That’s why I didn’t want them to meet earlier in my room.

Lemn (curse him) didn’t deny it, and he looked up at me, tilting his head.
“Mom?”

“I knew it!” Eleanora exclaimed. “He is your child after all!”

“He’s not,” I corrected, exasperated, but Eleanora wasn’t listening. Her delusions only multiplied as she looked back and forth between me and Patrick, blushing.

“If you have a child, that must mean that the two of you have...”

“We didn’t.”

“But, this morning...”

Well, Patrick had warned me. The unaddressed misunderstanding that I had leveraged to shoo Eleanora away from my room had backfired spectacularly.

Lemn’s appearance was roughly that of a ten-year-old boy—that fact alone should have been enough to make identifying me as his mother an impossibility. After a moment of consideration, Eleanora looked askance at me and Patrick in confusion, perhaps realizing this fact.

“Wait...” Eleanora gasped. “The two of you haven’t gotten married yet, have you? Could it be... Is it possible to have a child just by kissing, even if you aren’t married?!” Her eyes grew wide, as if the truths of this world had been revealed to her.

Oh, I see. She doesn’t know. She must’ve thought we were kissing in my room this morning.

“That adorable girl is my dearest best friend,” I sighed happily.

“That adorable girl is my follower,” Sanon sighed happily.

Our voices overlapped, and we turned to give each other a warning glare.

I braced myself, expecting a third round of combat, when Patrick mumbled, “This is all very strange.”

“Huh? What’s strange?”

“Sanon said she was coming here right away after hearing you say you’d marry Eleanora. Why did you say something so ridiculous, Yumiella?”

“Like I said, I thought Eleanora was hallucinating when she said that she’d heard Forehead Bestie’s voice...”

Wait... That is strange. This all started because Eleanora heard Sanon tell her to be careful of me. But Sanon had never made contact with Eleanora until that point, so what made her decide to act at this particular moment?

I decided to ask this question of Sanon directly, but before I could, Lemn spoke. “Sanon doesn’t have a high threshold for weirdness. She couldn’t take how ridiculous you were being to Eleanora for a moment longer, miss. That’s why she gave her dear follower that warning.”

Patrick nodded. “That makes sense. I don’t know the god of light very well, but I can understand that reasoning.”

“You still seem like you’re hung up on something, mister...”

“I wouldn’t be confused if only Sanon had appeared. The strange one is you, Lemn. Why did you decide to contact Yumiella today?”

Lemn froze with a brittle smile still spread across his face. Sanon’s sudden appearance had muddled things, but there was no question that Lemn was very suspicious. Not only was his presence in and of itself odd, our earlier confrontation with him had confirmed that the story of the resurrection of faith in the god of darkness was something he had fabricated.

We had assumed that these two gods had appeared for completely unrelated reasons, and yet our first meeting with both of them had occurred yesterday morning—Lemn appeared in my dream, and Sanon delivered her voice to Eleanora.

What really started all of this? I should probably ask the god who can’t lie.

I stared right into Sanon's eyes and asked, "I have a question for you, god of light. Until yesterday, you'd never interfered in Lady Eleanora's life. Why did you talk to her yesterday morning?"

"I spoke to her at last because the Yumiella Dolkness of a parallel world destroyed humankind." Sanon's tone was calm, and she spoke as if we were having a trivial conversation, like if I had asked her what her favorite food was.

Her shocking statement silenced us. Patrick and I were at a loss for words. Even Eleanora was quiet, perhaps having (for once in her life) read the proverbial room and taken notice of the suddenly heavy atmosphere.

I...destroyed humankind? Thanks for nothing, other-me. Given that, it's no wonder that a god might be cautious of me.

Lemn let out a disappointed sigh. "Why'd you have to go and tell her, Sanon?"

"I see, so that's also the reason you're here, Lemn," Sanon said. "I can't say I'm surprised, given your adorable passion for the collective good of humanity."

"I'm not the one who exerted divine influence over a single human's marriage," Lemn retorted. "How do you have so little to say about the end of the world after spending so much time and effort on a ridiculous misunderstanding?"

These gods didn't seem to get along very well. Unable to maintain a facade of civility, their irritation was seeping into everything they said to one another. Sanon was the first to look away in their staring contest.

She turned towards me. "You can ask Lemn for the details. I'll be taking my leave, then."

"God!" Eleanora cried in dismay. "You're leaving already?!"

"I don't think we'll ever meet in person like this again, Eleanora," Sanon told her solemnly. "But know this: I am always watching over you."

"No, how could that be?! I've been praying to you for so long, and I just got to finally meet you!"

In silence, Sanon closed the distance between herself and Eleanora, taking the young woman into a brief, gentle embrace. When she let go, Sanon turned her

back and was enveloped in a bright light, just as she was when she appeared. When the light disappeared, so did she, along with any trace that the god of light had ever stood before us.

Eleanora was gazing listlessly down at her feet, but before I could think of anything to say to comfort her, she suddenly threw her arms up and exclaimed, “I can’t stay upset! God said she would be watching over me! I’ll do my best, so please watch me try hard every day!” Though her expression at first glance appeared to be a cheerful one, I could see small tears forming in the corners of Eleanora’s eyes.

Eleanora and Sanon’s relationship had returned to its baseline: a mutual one-way street, where one would pray while the other would watch over from a distance. Since I didn’t know exactly how Eleanora felt about going to church, I couldn’t be sure what it meant for her to meet the god she believed in for naught but a single moment—

“Oh! I’ve just heard god’s voice! She says... ‘Good luck!’”

Are you kidding me...? Sanon, you just said goodbye to her as if you would never speak to her again. It hasn’t even been a few minutes; it’s barely been a few seconds!

As I stood there speechless, Lemn suddenly burst into laughter, as if he had been holding it in and couldn’t do so any longer.

“Sanon is so awkward. She was hurt in the past after getting too close to someone, and she’s been like that ever since. She tries to keep her distance from people like she just did now, even though it’s impossible for her to stay away.” Then, Lemn’s cheery tone completely changed, his voice becoming quieter as he continued. “She only has trouble because she looks at people individually. Things would be easier if she just looked at humankind as a whole...”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you mean that it might help if she were to, for instance, avoid using people’s names by calling them ‘mister’ or ‘miss’?”

“I don’t like how good your intuition is, miss...”

“As a god who prioritizes collective good over individual happiness, you

wouldn't be able to look the other way when there's a risk that I could destroy the world, right?"

It was still vague, but I was starting to get an idea of what Lemn's motives were. He'd sought me out in this world after learning that a different me had destroyed her version of this world.

Lemn, perhaps realizing that he couldn't play dumb anymore, replied to my question with a sour look on his face. "I was secretly gathering information behind the scenes, but Sanon ruined everything."

"I was suspicious of you long before she appeared," I assured him.

"Well, my motives are just as you suspect, miss. I guess there's no use hiding it now. Let me just ask you bluntly..."

I could easily guess what he was going to ask. I had no intention of destroying the world. I didn't know if he would believe me, but I was prepared to answer him with an emphatic "no." But the question that followed was not what I had expected.

"...just who are you, miss?"

"What an abstract question. What do you mean by that?"

"Let me rephrase it, then... Are you actually Yumiella Dolkness?"

I was about to answer that of course I was, but I stopped just before the words could leave my mouth. I had, in fact, deviated far from the true Yumiella.

I see, I get what he's asking now. Within the countless parallel worlds, I'm the only one who's an anomaly. I'm sure that I'm the only Yumiella with a soul reincarnated into this world from Japan. But how do I explain that? How much should I disclose to him?

When I didn't immediately respond to his question, Lemn went on. "It all started two nights ago. Remember how I said I can exchange information with my parallel-world selves? My other self from a certain world was killed by that world's version of you, miss. That Lemn had suggested to that world's Sanon that they attempt to build a united front against their Yumiella, but...well, every version of Sanon is stubborn. We were taken down individually."

She even defeated Sanon? My other self is strong.

Though it was a bit morbid, I was impressed with this alternate version of me.

“Are you saying that Yumiella will destroy this world?” Patrick cut in, his voice tinged with anger. “Yumiella would never do something like—”

Patrick seemed like he was about to lunge at Lemn, so I gently tugged at his sleeve to hold him back. “But I would, Patrick,” I explained softly. “The real me would indeed become an enemy of this world.”

“It seems like you do know something.” Lemn smirked in a way that seemed to indicate he was unsurprised by my response. Patrick, on the other hand, looked completely lost.

“Yes,” I admitted to Lemn, “but before I answer you, I have one question. Is it only the one world that’s on the brink of extinction? What about my alternate selves in the other parallel worlds?”

“There’s only one world where I’ve died. The you in that world is much stronger than any of your other selves. As for the Yumiellas in those other worlds, you, um...”

“I’m usually killed by Alicia and the others, the four heroes who stand against the Demon Lord, right?”

There was a short, stunned silence before Lemn asked, “Just *who* are you, miss...?”

I’m getting it now.

The proper order of events in this world and its parallels was the basic scenario of the original game, in which the plot progressed smoothly and Alicia and the others defeated the final boss—the Demon Lord—as well as Yumiella, the hidden boss. By contrast, there was the world that Lemn had described as being on the verge of extinction: a world in which Yumiella was too strong, Alicia and the others were defeated in her hidden boss battle, and even the gods themselves were powerless to stop her.

The only difference between these worlds was who won the hidden boss battle. These worlds likely followed nearly identical paths until that point. But

what about *this* world? Here, the plot of the game had veered so far off course that there was no semblance of the proper route remaining, and it was all because of me.

At first I found it strange to think that I could destroy the world. But as it turned out, it was actually stranger that I was living as peacefully as I currently was.

“Well, technically speaking, I’m not Yumiella. I can explain the nature of my true identity, as well as Yumiella’s true role in this world.”

“I knew it,” Lemn said triumphantly. “You’re totally different from every other Yumiella.”

“Yumiella?” Patrick asked, his dismay and confusion evident. “You’re not Yumiella? What are you talking about?”

I guess it’s finally time... I have to tell him about my past. This is probably going to take a while. I don’t even know where to begin. But there’s just one thing, one extremely important thing, that I want to tell him first.

“It’s a complicated situation, Patrick, but just know that, in the end, I’m still me.”

After a moment of silence, Patrick responded. “I’m sorry, I overreacted. Yumiella... You’re you. Of course you’re you.”

Interlude 2: Sanon

In the Royal Capital of the Kingdom of Valschein, there was a tall, impressive spire that stretched towards the heavens. This spire graced the roof of the Capital's Sanonist church, the place of worship for those who believed in the god of light. Sitting atop the narrow tower was a girl who had white hair and golden eyes. She let her legs dangle freely as she watched the people come and go throughout the city below.

Some of Sanon's most devout followers were currently praying to her in the church. All of their prayers echoed in Sanon's ears. Sanon listened to the prayers of her believers often enough that she knew the personalities of each and every one of her countless followers around the world. Whether the prayers expressed gratitude towards their lives, sincere wishes for the well-being of their loved ones, requests seeking personal gain, or laments of anger and unhappiness towards their god due to various misfortunes, she heard it all, and she took every prayer to heart.

Although she listened with attention, she never did anything about the prayers—she declined to respond to voices crying for salvation, nor did she secretly provide assistance to those requesting it. She didn't get involved or interfere with people. She only watched over them and observed how their lives played out. She would witness what fate had in store for those who prayed to her, and she would burn those fates into her mind.

Sanon was acquainted with another god, one who had no followers, and they would often observe to her, "From the perspective of your followers, it doesn't really matter whether you exist or not."

"The sun's light shines down onto everyone equally," she would always respond. But Sanon knew that this was all just pointless equivocation.

Things had been different in the past. Though Sanon's current practice was to

refrain from any direct involvement with humans, there had been a time when she had regularly interacted with her believers. She recalled one young girl for whom she'd had a particular affinity.

"That girl was... I wonder what I should have done for her."

The girl in question had been an orphan who grew up at a Sanonist orphanage, and she had been studying to become a member of the clergy. However, she wasn't very smart, and she wasn't very skilled at physical activities. Even the one thing she had a slight grasp on, using light magic, was something she wasn't able to do with any great skill. But the girl's prayers were purer and more beautiful than anyone else's.

The girl had a naivete to her that led her to believe that Sanon was a god just because she claimed to be one, despite never providing the girl with any kind of proof. The orphan's innocence led her to never question Sanon's teachings. The god of light had loved this girl. But this girl she so deeply loved...had died at a young age.

As Sanon unearthed the memories of that time, tears pooled in her eyes. The girl's end was not something so simple as death—her soul had disappeared without leaving a single trace.

This was long before the Kingdom of Valschein had been formed. The world had been facing a crisis, and if it continued, all light would have been lost, leaving the world veiled in darkness. There was only one way to save the world: the people had to sacrifice this girl. Considering it would save the entire world, it was quite a small price to pay. The girl made up her mind to go through with it, because it was for the world, and because she could save everyone around her.

"There's no need for you to be sacrificed," Sanon had pleaded with her.

"Thank you, God," she had said with a serene smile. "But I've made my decision. I don't mind dying, as long as everyone else gets to live."

"You must flee here. I'll take care of the rest. I'm Sanon, the god of light, the personification of the sun. I could use my power and solve this problem at once."

The girl saw right through Sanon's lie. Despite the fact that this girl never seemed to know the meaning of doubt, she had seen right through the brave front that Sanon had done her best to put up.

Sanon could have stopped the girl from sacrificing herself by force, but then the world would have ended. Saving the world meant that the girl had to die.

Trapped by such a dilemma, Sanon was, in the end, unable to do anything. Her powerlessness stung deeply. Was there any point in the existence of a god who only watched over...no, who only left people for dead?

Ever since the death of that precious girl, Sanon had stopped interacting with people. If she were to become close with another human, and she found herself in the same situation...she knew that she would be unable to do anything yet again. She couldn't pretend that she didn't grieve when individual people had to be hurt for the greater good of the whole, but she couldn't prioritize individual happiness at the expense of that greater good either... It didn't seem to matter whether she was there or not. And this was the moment when the pointless god was born.

The memory of the girl's end replayed itself over and over in Sanon's mind. She recalled how the girl was taken by the darkness and reduced to an immense amount of magical energy in order to save the world—and how her soul was subsumed into that grotesque magical sword.

"Please live, everyone..." Sanon whispered, repeating the girl's final words like a mantra, one that she would never forget. She quietly repeated it over and over, "Please live, everyone...everyone, please live."



It was early in the day, as Sanon perched on the spire of the church listening to her followers' prayers when she noted the presence of an unwanted guest.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"I think you already know," responded a familiar voice.

“I won’t help you.”

“Then I guess it was a waste of time to come,” the black-haired boy sighed as he appeared before her. He was Lemn, the god of darkness.

Sanon knew the reason for his visit—she had also sensed the abnormality in one of the worlds parallel to this one.

“Sanon, I’d like to implore you to assist me,” Lemn began once again, refusing to be deterred by her dismissal. “We need to work together and kill the Yumiella Dolkness of the destroyed parallel world, as well as the Yumiella Dolkness of this world. We’ll have them fight each other, and you can finish them both off when they’re weakened. If we follow this plan, we have a pretty good chance of winning.”

“Like I’ve said before, I won’t help you. I have no intention of meddling in squabbles between humans.”

“A whole world is gone. I think this is much bigger than a mere squabble.”

“No matter the scale of the crisis, my position on the matter won’t change.”

Sanon and Lemn truly didn’t get along. Lemn endlessly tried to build a better future for the collective benefit of the entire world, while Sanon watched over individual humans—their thoughts would never align.

Lemn let out a sigh, and his face twisted into a mocking look. “You do know that if you leave things the way they are, everyone will die.”

“So what? Does that mean I should kill this girl too?”

“At this rate, even the girl in this era you are so fond of will face misfortune. I have to say, I’m surprised. That girl looks exactly like *her*.”

“Shut your mouth...” Sanon spat, rage building, but then she took a deep breath and calmed herself down. In her mind, she saw the girl. That blonde girl, who currently lived in Yumiella’s home, was the spitting image of the other girl from Sanon’s past.

“What was her name...” Lemn feigned a thoughtful look. “Eleanora? You must not like that she’s friendly with Yumiella Dolkness.”

“I don’t mind in the least... Yumiella Dolkness is Eleanora’s only friend, after

all.”

“Isn’t she usually surrounded by people? She must have a ton of friends.”

“I wouldn’t call anyone who abandoned her the moment she lost her nobility a ‘friend.’”

Lemn was trying his best to goad Sanon into action for Eleanora’s sake, but the god of light was instead refuting his claims one by one. The sinister god of darkness wanted nothing but to advance his own plans. He didn’t have any interest in Sanon’s problems.

“You’re a creature of emotion, Sanon, so just do what you think is right.”

“Are you in any position to be saying that?” she retorted. “Who was the one to stop me when I tried to help that girl escape?”

“The situation then is different from the one now. Right now, you can save both the girl and the world. Back then you could only save one or the other.”

“*She* won’t be saved.”

“What?”

“If we follow your plan, Yumiella Dolkness won’t be saved.”

Hearing that Sanon wanted to save even the very girl who was a threat to this world, Lemn let out a deep, theatrical sigh.

It’s because you have such impossible ideals, because you try to save everything in sight, that you feel paralyzed and unable to do anything, Lemn mused.

He opened his mouth to give voice to these thoughts, then thought better of it. It would be a waste of time to press the matter further.

“This conversation has outlived its usefulness...” he grumbled. “Just so you know, I’m planning to go see Yumiella Dolkness tomorrow.”

“Is that so.”

“Before I came here to see you, I was talking to her through her dreams. It seems like she’s onto me though, so I’m going to have to meet her in person.”

“You tend to rub people the wrong way, so be careful,” Sanon said,

absentmindedly providing Lemn with considerate advice despite her habitual ambivalence towards him.

“Thank you,” Lemn responded automatically. He began to sink back into the shadows. Just as he was about to whisk himself away completely, his brain already working in the background to find a way to conceal his true reason for reaching out to Yumiella, the god of darkness volleyed off one last parting shot.

“You know, you’re much more emotional than you think you are. One day you’re going to face a situation where you’ll have to act.”

What an endlessly unpleasant god, Sanon thought. I’ve known him for so long, I thought I already knew all of his terrible traits. Clearly, I was wrong.

“I will continue to practice self-discipline,” she affirmed to herself. “I won’t interfere with anyone, not even if Eleanora’s life were to be in danger.” Then, she fell back into her reverie, listening to the prayers of her followers.

Sanon’s hearing and sight reached all over the world, and she listened and watched over anywhere the sun shone. Of course, the Dolkness estate had light pouring in through its many windows, so she could see inside the mansion as well. Sanon did her best to treat everyone equally, but she couldn’t help but check in on Eleanora a bit more frequently than others.

This morning, she had accidentally talked to her. Eleanora was excited about how she had heard the voice of a god, while Yumiella, on the other hand, was—

“What?!” Sanon recoiled in shock and horror. “Marriage?! What in the world is Yumiella Dolkness going on about?!” Sanon’s rapidly increasing anger flowed out of her and manifested as a light shining from the top of the church. “I won’t forgive her, no matter what! Be prepared, Yumiella Dolkness! Eleanora, I’ll come to save you right away!”

Overtaken by her emotions, Sanon quickly began getting ready.

Oh my, I’m going to be meeting Eleanora for the first time. What shall I do? What should I wear?

As she checked to see if there were any wrinkles on her white dress, Sanon paced back and forth around the church roof in agitation.

In the end, it took an entire day for Sanon to both physically and mentally prepare herself.

Chapter 3: The Hidden Boss Reveals the Secret of Her Past Life

Night had fallen, and the long day was coming to an end. After promising Lemn that I would explain things to him later, we parted ways. This was my own, entirely selfish request; I wanted to tell Patrick about my past first.

The lights were off in my room, and the space was instead illuminated by the moonlight pouring in through the window. Patrick hovered beside me as I sat in a chair and gazed at the moon.

“You must be tired after everything that happened today,” he soothed. “You can just tell me another—”

I sighed. “It’s okay. I need to tell you now. It’s only going to get harder the longer I wait.”

I’ve hidden it all this time. I’ve never told anyone else. But now’s the time. I have to tell him. The day has finally come: Patrick will learn about my past life, where I come from, and the truth of my identity. He might not believe me—he might even reject me. Those kinds of thoughts have kept me from telling anyone about my reincarnation until now. Patrick will believe me, though; surely he will accept the truth about me.

“I have memories of my past life,” I began, speaking more confidently than I had expected. “I have memories of being born into a different world, living there, dying there...and then being reborn as Yumiella.”

“Reborn... What do you mean by ‘a different world’? Is it a parallel world, like Lemn was talking about?”

“Not a parallel world. It’s more like an otherworld. Lemn likened parallel worlds to different branches on a tree, so if we stick to that metaphor, an otherworld would be an entirely different tree with its own roots. The laws of the world, the shape of the continents, even the history of the human race are completely different. The world I lived in didn’t even have magic.”

“You didn’t have magic? That’s... I can’t even imagine what that must be like.”

“From my perspective, the fact that magic exists at all is way weirder.”

“Isn’t it inconvenient to not have magic?”

“We have science...pieces of technology that are similar to magical instruments, so things were actually more convenient in that world.”

Huh? It’s nice that we’re having a pretty normal conversation, but isn’t he accepting all of this too easily? He doesn’t seem particularly surprised. This isn’t what I expected at all.

“Um, aren’t you suspicious of this, Patrick?” I asked. “I feel like this all must sound completely absurd.”

“If anything, I feel like a lot of things make sense now. For example, now that I know that your, um, *uniqueness* comes from your being from an otherworld, I understand it.”

“Oh, that’s fair.” I nodded, pleased with this explanation. “That might be why I’m a bit strange. What’s considered common sense probably varies wildly between different worlds.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Patrick said, giving me a sympathetic look. “It seems like you lived through a difficult world, but this world is relatively safe. You can relax here.”

I see, this world is safe. I don’t have to live like I did before... Hold on. I almost got swept up in the joy of the moment, but that’s not accurate. It’s gonna sound like I’m contradicting his kindness, but I have to tell him.

“This world is actually much more unsafe...” I admitted.

“You’re kidding.”

“It’s true. I can’t say that the entire world was at peace, but the area around me was the essence of peace itself. I lived almost twenty years in a country called Japan, and I never once feared for my life.”

“Twenty years? Did you die young in your previous life?”

Oh no. I was planning to quickly slip that little detail in to explain that,

mentally, I was just a little bit older than him. But now I've mixed up the order of things.

While I had told Patrick twenty years, more precisely I had lived nineteen years and several months. My current body was around the same age, which meant that my actual age was nineteen plus nineteen... No, wait, I had recalled my memories of my past life after I had lived for five years as Yumiella. That meant that I was nineteen plus nineteen minus five... It was too difficult to calculate. Even a supercomputer might not have been able to solve this problem. I didn't want to cause trouble for future mathematicians like Fermat did, so I decided to not tell Patrick about the math problem and fudge my exact age instead.

"I just barely didn't reach twenty. Actually, it might have been even shorter. Yeah, it was much shorter. I only lived for a short moment, so short that it was within the margin of error. It's basically like I never lived. But anyway, I'm Yumiella now, so I think it's correct to reference my age as the same as Yumiella's."

"Hm? What does that mean...?"

Wait, has Patrick not noticed the discrepancy? Can I even try to play dumb? I mean, I guess it's fine if he notices. The idea that women are better the younger they are is something a stupid person came up with. That bankrupt theory would mean that the cutest beings are, in fact, zero-year-old babies... Well, babies are cute. Maybe that theory is correct.

As I sat there pondering those rambling thoughts, Patrick, who had been trying to piece my words together into some sense, suddenly widened his eyes as if he had figured something out.

Oh no, am I caught? Has he realized how old I truly am?

"So you lived your life as someone other than Yumiella in an otherworld. That person was completely different from you, Yumiella... Is this all correct?"

"Yeah... Did you figure it out? I guess it's not good to hide it. It might disqualify me from being someone you could love, but... Ha ha, it's hard to admit it." Though I was trying hard to make the laugh sound genuine, I wasn't sure if it was convincing.

I wonder how most men would feel if they suddenly found out that their girlfriend was almost twice their age.

Since I wasn't able to get the words out, Patrick slowly opened his mouth and hazarded a guess: "Could it be...in your past life, you were...a man?"

"I was a woman!" He had made a grave error.

I can't believe him. Me? A man? How could anyone ever make that mistake? I'm totally a girl, both inside and out! Does that mean Patrick thought I was masculine?

"Does that mean you would've believed me if I said I used to be a man?" I asked, scandalized. "Did you think that my femininity was that lacking? Huh?"

"No, not at all!" Patrick backpedaled hard. "You're very feminine. I just thought... In case there was a chance that it was true..."

I won't actually get mad about this. I'll just keep bringing it back up for all eternity. I'm going to hold a grudge about this until I die. I'll refer back to this moment at every possible opportunity.

"Well, I'm not, like, upset or anything," I lied. "I don't know what you're getting so worked up about."

"You have some masculine qualities to you. There are times where it feels like I'm with my male friends." He considered. "That might be taking it a bit too far, but regardless, I think you have little to no femininity."

"Excuse me? What you're saying is the complete opposite of what you said before. What's the truth? I can't trust your words."

"But there are moments where your feminine side shows..." he continued, ignoring my outburst. "I ended up thinking about those moments constantly, and before I knew it I had fallen for you so hard that I couldn't stand it—"

"Whoa yah whoo!" A really strange sound had just left my mouth.

I think thy love for me doth exceed all measure, Sir Patrick. I'll forgive everything. Actually, now that he says that, I'm glad that I have such an incredibly small amount of femininity. If I'd had too much, maybe he wouldn't have fallen in love with me.

“Well, enough about that.” I waved away my concerns. “I’ve always been a woman, in both my previous life and in this one. As long as you know that, we’re fine.”

“I got it. I guess you were concerned about your age, then.”

Darn it. He brought up the taboo subject of age again. I thought I was able to cover it up with the gender talk. I wonder which would be more surprising for Patrick, finding out that his adorable Yumiella was actually a boy, or that his adorable Yumiella was actually much older than him. Most people would be... Hmm, I’m not sure.

“I see,” Patrick said with a melancholy sigh. “I thought you would calm down a bit more with age...”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Oh well, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but... I thought that you were strange because you didn’t really socialize with people when you were younger. I thought that you’d gain more social intelligence with time, but... Oh, could it be that you were in a similar situation in your past life? I’m sorry if I brought up some painful memo—”

“I, um, I’m sorry.”

That’s true—if you didn’t talk to anyone as a child then you’d probably be bad at socializing, but my personality was formed during my childhood in my previous life. I lived with my parents, and I had plenty of friends. I should tell him that. I feel like it isn’t right for him to think that my personality somehow got twisted due to unfortunate events in childhood.

“Just so you know, I had a regular family and friends in my past life,” I explained.

“Is that...a lie?”

“No, come on. I was even walking with a friend when I got into the accident that killed me.”

Patrick gave a long-suffering sigh. “I feel like I understand you even less.”

Why? The friend I was walking with at the time was at the very least more

normal than me. Considering how we were positioned on the sidewalk, I think she probably survived... She sometimes had a hard time sticking to the straight and narrow, but she was overall a good girl.

Oh, I'm getting tired now. Also...what did I go over already? I, a teenage girl and resident of a peaceful world, died due to an accident, and then I came to this world. That's all I've told him so far. I've spent so long explaining something that I could have just summed up in one sentence.

"Do you have any questions so far?" I asked with a sigh.

"You said that your previous world was peaceful, but it was a world where you, Yumiella, were killed, right? That doesn't sound very peaceful to me."

"I was just a regular person in my past life, you know?"

"What?"

"Huh?" It was no use, it just wasn't clicking. Words were surprisingly ineffective at times. "I was a regular person in my past life. I was run over and killed by a car...something similar to a carriage."

"A carriage that could kill *you*...?"

"I'm sure you've heard about fatal carriage accidents occurring in the Royal Capital every now and then."

"Well yeah, but *you*?" he asked, pressing his hand against his mouth.

I could tell that Patrick was seriously confused. He must have been overlooking the fact that I said I was "normal."

"I was even weaker than Lady Eleanora in my past life. I was the kind of human whose legs would break if I were to jump out of a second-story window."

"Yeah...?" He seemed to find this hard to believe for some reason.

"I'm saying I was weaker than the average person when I was in Japan. I was out of breath just by running a little bit, and I couldn't carry a thirty-kilo bag of rice. I only played sports until middle school, and that barely counts because it was table tennis."

Patrick's brain seemed to have bluescreened. More than the fact that I had a past life, the fact that I was physically weak in said past life must have shaken him to the core. I could tell what he usually thought of me.

Patrick finally unfroze after about a minute.

Being quiet for a whole minute is pretty long.

"So...in your past life, you were a normal person?" he repeated.

"Yup. I was just a regular student."

He finally got it. The only problem was that this was all just the preamble to the main event.

I was getting tired from all the talking, but I decided to push through for a little longer.

"So, this is where the real story begins. Where it starts relating to my other self, the one who destroyed the parallel world."

"I think I have a vague idea of what you mean from what we've already discussed. That other Yumiella doesn't have memories of a past life, right?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm assuming." I was glad he was quick to understand. All I had to do now was explain that this was the world of an otome game... This felt like it was going to be the hardest part. "I also know what the actual Yumiella's personality is supposed to be like. This world is exactly like the world in a...story, one that I know from my previous world."

"A story? Is this a world inside a book?"

"Um, well... There are differences in the details so... I don't really know for sure. I suppose that if I really think about it, it's possible that my previous world was the world from another story altogether, so it's probably a waste of time to think about it too hard."

"Well, I guess that's true..."

The Japan of my past life could have been the world of a game or manga. Even if you had lived all your life in a virtual world that had been created by someone, and then you managed to escape, there was no guarantee that wherever you ended up was actually the original reality. For this reason, I

decided to consider this world that I lived in now to be reality.

“In that story from my world, a hero and a saintess defeat the Demon Lord. After defeating the Demon Lord, they face an even stronger enemy. That enemy is me, Yumiella Dolkness.”

“I understand...”

“I’m supposed to be defeated by the main characters of the story, but there’s a world where something went wrong and Yumiella won. I think the parallel world that Lemn told us about is *that* world.”

“I see.” Patrick nodded before closing his eyes and sinking into thought. Patrick was good at picking up on things, so he had probably realized who the hero and the saintess were. He took a deep breath, as if he had finished sorting out his thoughts, and then he continued. “I understand the situation. I get it all, your past life and your true role. With all that said, I just have one question.”

Only one? I would have attacked me with questions if I were him. I wonder what his question is. It must be really important since it’s just the one.

Patrick seemed slightly nervous to ask it. “Are you glad you came to this world? Do you ever wish you could return to your original world...?”

“I think I’m already dead over there, but I don’t really want to return to my previous world. Even if you told me I could go back right now, I don’t think I would. I’m already used to this world. Also... Um...” I took a deep breath before continuing. “Um... I’m glad I came here. Since I met you.”



Patrick smiled softly and said, “I’m so glad to hear that.” Encouraged by his smile and to cover my own embarrassment, I smiled back.

After finally revealing the secret that I’d been unable to tell anyone, it felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest. Without thinking, I got closer to Patrick and stretched myself upwards. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have been able to reach his face.



The next morning found Lemn once again sitting at my dining room table, digesting what I’d just told him about the memories of my past life. Since it was my second time telling the story after chatting with Patrick the night before, I was able to cut down on some details and explain things more smoothly.

“I see. Memories of an otherworld...” Lemn muttered as he shamelessly stuffed his face with bread. He appeared to find the whole thing to be dubious in the extreme.

Which seems like a more normal reaction, to be honest. I can’t fault someone for thinking I’m lying while talking about a past life and whatnot. In the end, there’s only one thing I need to convince him of: that I have no intention of destroying the world.

“I don’t really have any proof for you, so you’re just going to have to believe me,” I pointed out.

“Well, I suppose that the only real way to account for your many eccentricities is an explanation as outlandish as coming from an otherworld.”

“Isn’t it enough to know that the me here before you is completely different from the parallel-world version of me who destroyed her world?” I felt bad for the world that had been destroyed, but I couldn’t do anything about it since it had happened somewhere I couldn’t even go.

The other Yumiella and I have nothing to do with each other. The paths of our worlds will never cross, meaning we’ll never meet. All right, then there’s nothing more to discuss.

The tumultuousness of the past several days was finally coming to an end,

and it was definitely time to say goodbye to Lemn, who was still sitting there, casually gulping down all of my scrambled eggs. As I began planning how I was going to kick the god of darkness out of my house, an affable smile spread across his face.

“So, are you ready to discuss how we’re going to deal with the miss from the parallel world?” Lemn asked.

“What?”

“Did I not tell you? The Yumiella Dolkness from the parallel world will definitely come to this world next.”

Huh, is she still not satisfied after destroying an entire world? My other self sounds way too violent.

“Why is she coming here? What does my other self want?”

“Remember what we talked about before? About how to unlock your level cap?”

“Oh, right!”

One of the ways to unlock your level cap is to kill a version of yourself from a parallel world. I see, so she must be after me.

“But that doesn’t mean she would definitely come to *this* world, does it?” I asked. “Aren’t there countless parallel worlds?”

“Even if all these worlds are parallel, they’re separated by something similar to distance. Her world neighbors this world directly.”

“Then that means there’s a possibility that she’ll go to the world neighboring hers on the other side. Fifty percent... That’s a pretty high chance.”

“Nope, there’s a one hundred percent chance she’ll come here. Remember, all of the other Yumiella Dolknesses are gone.”

Oh, that’s what he was talking about.

A majority of the worlds parallel to this one followed the story of the otome game, meaning that in almost every other world, I was defeated in battle. The only exceptions were the Yumiella in the parallel world who’d beaten Alicia and

the others, and me, who'd followed a different path altogether. Of the countless parallel worlds, the only Yumiellas alive were the two of us—it was no wonder that Lemn was concerned.

“Is it even possible to travel to a different world? You can't do it, right? There's also the possibility that my other self doesn't know how to unlock the level cap.”

“That's, um... Well... There's someone who's been secretly pulling her strings,” Lemn said, becoming suddenly evasive, despite how responsive he'd been to my questions thus far.

I assumed this “someone” was a higher being than Lemn—like someone powerful enough to be the only being above level 99 in all the parallel worlds.

“It sounds like this someone might be more of a threat than my other self.”

“Don't worry about him. He has a lot of restrictions when it comes to interfering with the world. I'm sure he wouldn't want to use up all the resources he's saved up.”

“So I should just prepare to beat up my other self?”

“Yup, that's right.”

I wasn't going to take everything Lemn said at face value, but right now I had no choice but to believe him.

Fighting myself... I've always brute forced my way through battles using my maxed-out stats, but a fight without that advantage will probably be brutal.

I sat there, lost in thought as I pondered what would likely be the strongest enemy I'd ever face. Just then, Patrick entered the dining room.

“Morning, Yumiella,” he said with a yawn. “Sorry for oversleeping.”

“Morning. A lot happened yesterday, so you must've been tired. Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah, but you should take it easy too,” Patrick said as he sat down. He shot Lemn a quick glance before asking, “Did you tell him about...?”

“I explained the gist of things, a little bit about how I have memories of my

past life. Oh, and by the way, apparently my other self is going to come here. Lemn and I were talking about how we need to come up with a plan.”

That’s right, I have Patrick on my side! Sucks for you, other me—you’re probably alone, but with Patrick’s help I’m totally going to defeat you.

In contrast to my confidence, my helpful partner seemed concerned.

“That’s... That shouldn’t be something you have to deal with, Yumiella. You have nothing to do with her.”

I shrugged. “It seems like she’s after me, so it doesn’t look like we can avoid an encounter.”

“Are you okay with that...?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Fighting with a version of yourself from a parallel world... You may be different people on the inside, but do you have it in you to go up against a person who looks exactly like you?” he asked, looking distraught. “Won’t that be too rough on you?”

Would it be rough? I wondered, as I imagined myself and my parallel twin squaring off against each other.

I’d had the advantage of my memories from my past life to ground me, but the other Yumiella had never had anything like that. She had been thrown into a harsh world without anything to help her, and since I was sure she had been unable to get anyone on her side, she had ended up despising the world.

While I was spending time with Patrick and Eleanora, she had been all alone. She was undeniably the hidden boss, an indisputable evil, and a threat to this world. But perhaps I didn’t have any right to reprehend her for that.

I can see it now: she’ll come up to me with her frozen, blank expression and punch me right in the gut. It’ll probably be more painful for her, so I’ll let her do it. Then she’ll slap me across the face... Hey, it’s an unwritten rule that the face is off-limits! How dare you! Your face pisses me off! I don’t like how you’re so expressionless! And then, I’ll leap straight towards her, raising my fist, and...

“Uh, yeah, I think I’ll be fine,” I said after a short pause. “I think it’ll actually be

easier to beat her up because I won't have to hold back."

"What?"

"I tried imagining fighting her just now, and it turned into an actual fistfight. We were both trying to punch each other in the face."

"Huh...?" I didn't think Patrick would be so put off by my thoughts.

Well, my predictions of the future are usually off, so who knows; we might end up peacefully talking things out.

"Just so you know, I want to settle things as calmly as possible," I assured Patrick. "It just all depends on her."

"Please handle things as peacefully as you can. I'll help you if you need me, but it would be painful to have to fight someone who looks like you."

"Come on," I protested. "The other Yumiella is a completely different person. You don't have to be considerate towards her."

"Could you fight someone who looked exactly like me, even if we were different people on the inside?"

A bad guy with Patrick's face... I couldn't possibly forgive him for committing acts of evil while wearing that lovable face. I'll rearrange his face first, and beat him up to the point there isn't any trace of Patrick left...

"Huh? I could totally fight them. If anything, I'd be more motivated to take them down."

"I see... I guess that's fine, then," he answered, his voice cold. There was something sorrowful about his expression.

But why...?

This conversation wrapped up, Patrick, Lemn, and I settled into a meeting to discuss how we would deal with the other Yumiella.

"I know we're trying to come up with a plan, but what exactly are the goals we are trying to achieve?" I asked.

"It's not like we know when and where she's going to appear..." Patrick said.

“And I don’t think setting any kind of trap would work against a Yumiella either.”

It seemed like we had already run out of options, despite the fact that the discussion had only just started.

Lemn burst into coarse laughter. “Have you two forgotten about my function in this world? I govern dungeons and magical instruments. We could put you at quite the advantage if I bequeathed to you a rare magical instrument, something of the very highest class.”

“Whoa!” I gasped.

That would be incredible. Can he manipulate the item drop rates or something? Messing with RNG is truly the work of a god.

Lemn appeared to be pleased when I gave him a look of genuine respect.

“First off, let’s see...” Lemn considered a moment. “What about a weapon affixed with the element of light, your greatest weakness? I know the location of one of the best, hidden deep within a dungeon in a place you humans call Valius. The item in question is a sword of light that slashes through darkness. The god of light, Sanon, even helped forge it.”

“Hm...?” I had a sinking feeling that I knew exactly what sword he was talking about...

“There’s no human alive that can reach the deepest levels of that dungeon,” Lemn continued. “The holy sword should still be sleeping. But it might be difficult for you to wield, miss, so maybe your beau should be the one to... Is something wrong?”

The dungeon in Valius was actually somewhere I’d visited plenty of times during one of my summer breaks at the Academy. I’d cleared the dungeon multiple times in order to finally obtain a dark-type sword. During one of my many descents into that dungeon, a light-type sword had dropped from the final boss, one which was so powerful that I couldn’t really touch it directly. I didn’t need it, so I’d sold it, and it had ended up in the hands of Alicia.

She stabbed me right in the back with it, and then... What happened after that...? Oh, that’s right. A sword like that was dangerous to have around, so I

made it disappear using my most powerful spell, Black Hole.

“That sword is gone,” I admitted.

Lemn blinked in confusion. “Huh?”

“I destroyed it using *Black Hole*. Oh, unless it’s possible that it regenerated itself after that?”

“In that case it can no longer be obtained...” Lemn said, looking crestfallen.

Oh no, I did something bad. I’ll have to cheer him up.

“I’m sure there are a bunch of other neat artifacts that you could help us obtain! You’re the god presiding over all of the most powerful magical instruments, after all.”

“Other instruments, yeah...” Lemn thought for a second, then suggested, “This falls under Sanon’s purview, but there’s a magical instrument that can create a barrier. It’s a light-type item, so it’ll probably come in handy. Where was it again... I feel like it was at a Sanonist church.”

“I’m sorry...” I said, somewhat sheepishly. “I destroyed that one as well.”

Lemn fell silent. I felt terribly sorry for him. The air of darkness and despair surrounding him no longer seemed related to the fact that he was the god of darkness.

This isn’t good. I have a feeling something bad is about to happen.

“Oh, you broke that too, huh.” Lemn seemed defeated. “I guess there’s nothing that can be done, then... Other than the two instruments that didn’t survive an encounter with you, I suppose there is a giant flute that can control monsters. A monster-summoning flute can only call monsters to the user, but the giant flute can impart instructions to the monsters. You’d need my approval to unlock its potential, but—”

“Um...” I interrupted.

“Oh, sorry. I guess that flute is too weak, isn’t it? Monsters wouldn’t be much help if we’re going up against a version of you, ha ha.”

“It’s not that, but... That flute’s been broken too, by Patrick.”

I'll leave the excuses to you, Patrick! I can't take this anymore! I thought, giving him a significant look, to which Patrick shook his head at me in response. *But you're the one who broke it!*

After the coup d'état spearheaded by the former Duke of Hillrose had floundered, and his plan to use the giant monster-summoning flute to overrun Dolkness County had failed, I had, for my own part, been planning to save the flute and treasure it forever, but Patrick broke it on the spot.

It's not like I meant to destroy either of the other magical instruments, and Patrick had felt that he had good reason to destroy the flute...

But excuses like that would probably only make Lemn feel even worse. I had no idea what to say to him.

I'm sorry, Lemn. You don't have to keep trying to come up with solutions.

Lemn didn't give up. "What about an elixir?" he hazarded, in a voice so faint that I could barely hear him. "Unless you destroyed that already too? It's a magical instrument I made with the utmost care. I did my best, hoping it would be useful to humans."

"Oh!" I cried, injecting my voice with extra enthusiasm. "I've never destroyed an elixir! I've never even seen one!"

"Yeah! I've never even heard of such a magical instrument," Patrick chimed in. "I'm sure it's still lying somewhere deep in a dungeon, completely undisturbed!"

We both worked together to try and perk Lemn up. A more chipper expression flashed across the boy's face.

"Really?! Yay!" Lemn enthused. "I bet you have no idea how incredible an elixir is! Let's go fetch it right away!"

And so, we were off on a trip to obtain an elixir. But I knew something that the other two didn't—elixirs weren't really that useful. I decided to not say anything, though, for Lemn's sake. He bounced with an excitement that matched his childlike appearance.



We had left the mansion behind, and soon enough, we found ourselves inside a dungeon. Patrick and I followed behind Lemn, who was leading the way enthusiastically. We had come here to obtain an elixir, as part of our plans to go up against my other self.

The dungeon in question was very close to the Royal Capital in Valschein. There were two dungeons near the Royal Capital, and this one was the more difficult to clear of the two. It was also known as “the hidden dungeon,” and I had visited it from time to time while I was a student. Members of the military, adventurers, and students of the Academy usually visited the lower-level dungeon, which left this one comparatively empty, making it convenient to use. Patrick had also done a lot of level grinding in this dungeon while he was a student, and now he, too, was nearing level 99.

It's not the most efficient dungeon... Wait, hold on. Patrick wasn't even level 10 when he entered the Academy. He mainly did his level grinding in this dungeon, and he's already around level 90? I wonder exactly how much EXP you need to reach level 99. Considering how fast Patrick has been leveling up...that suggests that there's a chance that I reached max level way before I got to the Academy. Was all the work I put in as a child just a waste of time...? No, I should stop thinking about it. It's not good for my mental health.

It had been only a few hours since Lemn had described both the elixir and its location, and we had decided to go and fetch it at once. We traveled quickly towards the Royal Capital, and soon enough, we were traversing the dungeon's depths.

“Man, Sanon is so stingy,” Lemn grumbled. “She can go anywhere as long as the sun is out, so she could've just transported us.”

“Teleportation is such a useful skill. Is there any way that I could learn it?” I looked hopefully at the god of darkness.

“Why do you keep wanting the abilities of the gods, miss?”

“It's not something only I want,” I protested. “I'm sure most people would want such useful abilities if they could learn them.”

As we talked, we continued to progress deeper into the dungeon. Lemn apparently knew the shortest way to the deepest level, and he marched

forward without any hesitation.

The only slight impediments were the monsters that appeared during our journey. The enemies completely ignored Lemn as if he weren't even there, and they instead came straight for Patrick and me. I'd always known that monsters only attacked humans, but seeing it in action really made the fact that Lemn was a god sink in.

We were now close to the deepest level.

"Yumiella," Patrick whispered to me. "You once told me that the boss here was dangerous, but you never told me what it is."

"Did I really say that?"

"You definitely did. You said that I shouldn't fight the boss here, no matter what."

If I was correctly recalling the content of the game, the boss here was a giant golem. It was one of the strongest enemies in terms of its defense against both physical and magic attacks, but its attack and speed were low. It wasn't particularly dangerous, it just took forever to take down, which made it a bad fit for level grinding. It didn't have great drops either, which made this dungeon less appealing overall.

Oh, right... Now I remember. That's why I told him not to go up against it.

"I did say that. But I didn't warn you off because the monster is strong; it's because its defense is too high. It's inefficient for level grinding."

"That's...a very Yumiella-like response."

"That's not the first time you've said that. Is it supposed to be a compliment?"

Patrick paused and glanced at me in a way that was difficult for me to interpret. "It's a compliment..." he said finally.

I guess it's a compliment, so I'll let this one go, I thought to myself as a monster popped out from behind a corner and I took it out with a roundhouse kick.

We continued, progressing smoothly without any major issues, and within an hour or so, we were able to reach the entrance to the boss's lair on the fiftieth

floor.

Before heading in, I decided to check something with Lemn first.

“Will we get the elixir by defeating the boss here?”

“I can manipulate the drop rates within the dungeon, so we’ll definitely get it,” he assured me.

“That’s good to hear. I don’t want to have to go through this multiple times.”

“I’ll leave the boss to you two, though. I’m sure you’ll be fine, seeing how you two have fared up to this point.”

In the game, the elixir wasn’t a guaranteed drop. I’d found that out after clearing the main story of the game and spending some time farming this dungeon in preparation for the Yumiella battle. After being terribly irritated by the boss’s high defense, I finally obtained an elixir.

The elixir could fully recover the HP and MP of a member of your party. It was very rare to have an item that could in a single turn fully heal a character that had hit zero HP and fainted. When I fought against the unreasonably strong hidden boss, I hadn’t wanted to slip up and use the elixir at the wrong moment—and because of my cautious attitude, I ended up defeating Yumiella without using the elixir at all. That was all the elixir was: a fancy recovery item that frugal people like me couldn’t bear to use.

I shrugged these thoughts away. “Well then, let’s head in.”

The doors to the boss’s lair opened, and what awaited us inside was a large golem, sitting squarely in the back of the room. It appeared to be made out of some sort of metal, and it was obvious that it had maxed out its defense. The golem sensed the approaching intruders, and one of its eyes began to glow.

“Yeah, that does look like a difficult enemy,” Patrick lamented.

“Leave it to me! I have an idea.” I had a trick up my sleeve to defeat the golem.

While this world seemed like one you’d find in a simplistic number-crunching RPG, it was much more nuanced in reality. Battles weren’t fought by shaving

down a straightforward stat like HP—they were actual fights to the death. Hitting your opponent’s weak point was an important and effective battle strategy.

There was no need to slowly chip away at the golem’s armor plates, shining dimly in the low light of the boss lair. Our true targets were the monster’s joints. Because of how its armor was constructed, we could take advantage of the gaps between the plates in those areas. The segment that connected its head to its torso appeared to be its weakest point.

The golem will probably stop moving right away if we cut off its head. Even if it turns out it can still move without a head, its movement should be pretty restricted by that point; its eyes are in its head, after all. Sure, those big anime robots can keep fighting if you take out the main cameras in their heads, but I bet a golem can’t do the same.

As I stalked slowly towards the metal giant, Patrick called out to me from behind. “Do you want to use my sword?”

“My bare hands will be fine. This requires precision.” I had left my own sword at home, but I wasn’t sure if I could accurately hit the golem’s weak point with a weapon, so my bare hands would be fine. Actually, they were preferable.

The golem looked down at me from its towering height. I stared at its massive arm as the boss slowly lifted it into an attack position, and I thought about how I might reach its neck. This looked like a job for my partner.

Our thoughts and hearts are so connected, we should be able to perform combination moves on the spot.

“Patrick! We’re going for a combo move!”

“A what...?” He looked at me blankly. My hopes were dashed. We couldn’t do it.

C’mon, man, I thought in exasperation as I turned back to the golem just in time to find its arm swinging down. I stopped the gigantic arm from crushing me, holding it back with one hand while I discussed the plan with Patrick.

“Our combo move!” I reminded him. “It’s that thing where you raise the ground up and I jump off it.”

“If that’s what you wanted you should’ve said so,” Patrick grumbled. “Use your words, Yumiella.”

“Yeah, you’re right, sorry.”

All right, let’s take it from the top.

I pushed the golem back and called out once more, “Patrick!”

“Got it.” Patrick cast an earth-magic spell, making the stone floor in just the small area I was standing rise up, so quickly that I was taller than the golem almost at once.

As soon as my specially made launchpad stopped rising, I leaped up towards the ceiling with my own strength...and came to an abrupt halt when my head crashed straight through the ceiling with the force of my momentum.

“Mister...” Lemn craned his neck upwards to contemplate my legs dangling down. “What is she trying to do?”

Patrick sighed audibly. “I don’t know.”

I could hear Lemn and Patrick’s exasperated voices below, muffled only slightly by the stone surrounding my head.

That wasn’t something I should’ve done in a dungeon, I reflected as I tried to pull my head out of the ceiling. *I’ll try it again one day. I think it might be a useful strategy if I’m up against a strong enemy that’s airborne. I’ve decided that I am going to consider this to be part of the plan. Check out my smooth moves,* I thought, twisting my body to the side and kicking off the ceiling.

I popped free of the hole I’d made, and I found myself falling in a straight line towards the golem’s head. The golem’s slow reflexes prevented it from defending itself. My ultimate hand-sword, additionally strengthened by the speed of my fall, was going to pummel this golem right in the throat!

“Oops,” I muttered sheepishly. “I’m a bit off.” My finger, straight as a pin, had indeed ended up stabbed deep into the golem—but rather than striking the weak point at its throat, I had pierced its chest, where its armor appeared to be the thickest.

I pulled my hand out and landed gracefully on the ground, while the golem’s

enormous body crashed down simultaneously behind me.

“Incredible,” Lemn said admiringly.

“No, I...” I attempted modesty, but it didn’t stick. “I mean, yeah, that’s just how strong I am.”

I was embarrassed at myself for spending so much time thinking about weak points and strategy when I’d ended up using none of them. I’d meant to fight this battle with brains, but had ended up using nothing but brawn.

In my defense, it’s partially the golem’s fault too. How pathetic of it to die right away after getting poked by the bare finger of a mere human. The highest level of defense? What a joke. Is the golem too weak, or am I too strong? What a hollow victory.

“Let’s go home, then,” I sighed.

“Huh?” Lemn said, confused. “You just want the one?”

“There’s more than one elixir?!”

I had thought that an elixir was a unique item, with only a single one in existence. However, it appeared from Lemn’s reaction that it was just that its drop rate was incredibly low, which meant that I maybe could have gotten several in the game as well.

“There are a total of seven elixirs,” Lemn said, holding up seven fingers to underline his point. “I can ensure that they drop every time, so let’s do six more rounds. With your strength, miss, this will take no time at all.”

“Are there really only seven?”

Le mn paused. “I wouldn’t lie,” he said at last. “That’s the truth.”

Well, that means there are definitely more than seven. Well, even if there are, they’re still rare. I’m not surprised that this suspicious god would refuse to give us all of them. But seven is more than enough. Let’s not dig too deep into this and just prepare for the next round.



Our seven rounds of farming the dungeon ended quickly with minimal fuss.

We memorized the route and sprinted to the deepest level. It was quick—almost too quick.

Patrick even took down the boss by himself three times. He had aimed for its joints—first immobilizing its hands, then its feet, and then landing a final blow at the place where the armor connected around its neck. He had done exactly what I'd intended to do as if it were the easiest thing in the world.

It's fine, I assured myself. I'm not upset or anything.

With that, we had obtained everything we'd come here for, and so we headed home right away.

Since we had departed on our impromptu dungeon expedition in the early morning, it was still only a little past noon. I called for some tea to refresh us during our well-deserved break, and I took a meditative sip as I studied the elixirs.

The seven clear jars were laid on the table. They were made of glass so thin and delicate that I felt like I might break one just by holding one in my hand. On top of that, the bottles were so unnaturally transparent that when illuminated by a strong enough light, they seemed to disappear altogether. Finally, as for the contents themselves, the containers appeared to be completely empty.

"Um, there's nothing in these," I observed.

"That's how they're supposed to be," Lemn explained. "An elixir isn't something you drink like a potion."

"Hm? Are elixirs items for recovery, then?" Patrick asked.

Oh, he doesn't know what elixirs are.

I had my knowledge from the game, but I didn't know any details about elixirs, since I'd never actually ended up using any. But I knew that they were consumed in a manner similar to the several other kinds of potions in the game by inputting the command "Use," so I had simply assumed that they were also liquids.

Lemn held up a translucent elixir and explained, a little smugly, "The elixir is,

simply put, a resurrection item. It's a versatile medicine that heals even the dead, bringing them back to life. It is an exception beyond all other exceptions to the laws of the world."

"What?! It can revive the dead?!" I was truly shocked.

In the game, reaching zero HP caused a character to faint. This represented the idea that they were in a critical state, just shy of dying without further treatment. I had thought that elixirs would be useless to me because I could simply heal myself with my endless supply of mana, but being able to revive someone from death utterly changed things. That meant I could die and come back to life seven times. It wasn't some berserk number of lives like twelve, but it was still a respectable number.

"There are requirements for it to be effective, of course. It needs to be used right after you die... I think you'd have a window of a couple hours at most. Also, you need at least a part of the person you're resurrecting."

"A part of the person?"

"It means it won't work if they've been completely annihilated. For instance, that spell you like to use, *Black Hole*, would be pure annihilation."

"If that's the case, I'm not too sure this would be an effective recovery item against the other Yumiella," Patrick said with a bitter expression.

I can't believe the other me is using magic that makes resurrection impossible... My alternate self is so evil and outrageous. I feel like it's going to be just like in the game, and we'll end up not using any of our elixirs for one reason or another.

"That's why we should just set aside a part of you beforehand," Lemn said with a toothy grin.

"Patrick, I'm going to cut off your arm, so don't move!" I announced, standing abruptly and advancing towards him.

Patrick leaped up. "Back off! You're not totally joking, are you?! Don't come near me!" He began inching nervously backwards.

Don't worry, I'll take good care of your arm and keep it safe in case anything

happens. And I'll stare at your beloved arm each night as I fall asleep. It might even be nice to hold your disembodied hand as I drift off to sleep, or maybe I could try using it as a literal arm-pillow.

I smiled at Patrick blissfully. "We'll be together...forever."

"Gah!"

Patrick continued to put distance between us, the blood draining from his face.

"Hey, why are you running? Hey? Why, why, why, why, why?"

Maybe I took things too far. I guess that's enough of pretending to be a psycho killer girlfriend.

"Come on, I'm obviously joking," I said soothingly. "You got way too scared."

"The look in your eyes made it seem very real..." Patrick said, his voice trembling a little. "I think you have the potential to do something like that..."

"Me too," Lemn chimed in. "That was the most scared I've ever been of you."

Huh, I didn't know that I had such a talent for terror. I feel like I've discovered something new about myself, but I'm not even a little bit happy about it, I thought, returning to my seat.

"So," I said, coming back to the original question, "what do you mean by setting aside parts of us?"

"Nothing as horrific as what you suggested. Hair counts as a part of you, you know?"

I see, so I can come back to life just by setting aside some of my hair.

Patrick, returning from the far corner of the room he'd fled to, sat back down.

"Hair is fine," he sighed. "We should each keep some just in case."

He reached for his tea. Right as he brought the cup to his lips to take a drink, I quickly leaned over the table, grabbed some of his hair, and yanked it out.

"Yoink!"

"Ow!"

The hair was obtained—I clutched a hefty chunk of gray strands in my hand. However, the shock of this sudden assault on his head had caused Patrick to drop his teacup. The high-pitched sound of shattering china rang out.

“Oh no, why’d you do that, Patrick?” I scolded.

“You’re blaming *me*?” he said, glaring at me, blinking back tears of pain as he pressed his hand to his head.

Uh, sorry for taking too much. But you could just yank out my hair too; it won’t hurt me a single bit...

Before I could give voice to a proper retort, Lemn pointed at the broken teacup. “Why not try fixing that with an elixir?”

“What? It’s a teacup.”

“You’d be reviving a piece of earthenware that is, for all intents and purposes, dead. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

I didn’t realize that the concepts of life and death applied to inanimate objects. Naturally, pouring a potion onto a broken item wouldn’t do anything. Since an elixir could work on inanimate objects, this more than anything else made it clear that, since an elixir wasn’t something that was ingested, it was best to think of it as something entirely different from a potion.

Le mn handed me one of the small jars, and I looked down at the scattered shards of the teacup.

“What should I do with this?” I asked.

“Try filling it with magical energy,” Lemn responded. “Focus your mind on the teacup, as if you’re casting a spell.”

“This is a single-use item, right...? This feels like a waste.”

“It’s important to practice how to use it before you really need to.”

He had a point. Our backs would be up against the wall once we were in a situation where we needed to use an elixir. It would be good to practice using it so we could act swiftly in such a case. Plus, even if we used one now, we’d still have six left.

Just as Lemn had instructed, I slowly started pouring my magical energy into the elixir. I stared at the shards of the teacup and silently chanted a command for it to be repaired.

The effects took place immediately. The small jar in my hands began to shine, and the beams of light that poured out arced towards each shard. They floated upwards, and the pieces came together in midair like a puzzle, reforming the teacup. Returned to wholeness, the cup silently deposited itself atop the table, and the elixir simultaneously exploded into tiny pieces in my hand, sparkling as it dissolved into thin air.

Oh, what a waste.

Patrick, who was closest to it, reached out to examine the cup.

“It’s completely fixed,” he said, turning it over in his hands. “You can’t even see the seams.”

“Wow, that’s neat.”

“But... This is...”

What is perplexing him so much? I wondered as I looked over at the teacup once more. I realized what was strange right away. There was steam billowing out of it—the teacup was filled with hot tea.

“Why is there tea in there?” I asked, dumbfounded. “Also, was it even that hot? It’s like it was just poured.”

“It was less than half full, and I remember it being a little cooled down too.”

It appeared that the elixir had not only revived the cup, but the tea inside it as well.

Is this how it’s supposed to work? Is this a feature, not a bug?

I gave Lemn a questioning look, and he responded with one of his affable smiles.

“Even if you regenerate the flesh, a dead body won’t be revived without the soul,” he explained. “It’s only a true resurrection once you return the insides, not just the container, right? This is the power of an elixir.”

Though Lemn spoke of this as being the true meaning of resurrection, it put me in mind of something else entirely.

Rather than resurrection, this is more like the item that triggers...

“Time travel—” I cut myself off, not wanting to derail the afternoon by having to explain something else from my past life. “Never mind, it’s nothing. The result is the same anyways.”

This wasn’t quite what I’d been expecting from the elixir, but its effects were more than satisfactory. It would be best if we didn’t have to use one, of course, but it was nothing but reassuring to have six of them just in case something went wrong.

I’ll have to collect hair from Eleanora and everyone else in the mansion later. As for Ryu... I think if I peel off a scale, that should work.

“Be careful,” Lemn cautioned. “The bigger and the more complicated whatever you’re trying to resurrect is, the more mana you’ll need to use.”

“Understood.”

The amount of mana I’d needed to regenerate the teacup had been minuscule, but it made sense that reviving a person would use much more mana. I’d never been in trouble because of a lack of mana, so not having enough magical energy likely wasn’t something I would have to worry too much about. What concerned me was whether a situation in which we’d need to use an elixir would be one where we *could* actually use it. If we were to get wiped out completely, there would be no one left to use it—and we would need to actually have an elixir on hand in the first place. After having used one in our teacup experiment, we now had six left. Having them all in the same place would be too risky, so I wasn’t sure what to do with them all.

“How should we divide up these six elixirs?” I wondered aloud. “First, Patrick and I can each take one, then...”

“I can hold on to them, if you’d like,” Lemn volunteered. “You don’t have to worry about them disappearing if they’re inside a shadow, and I can bring them to you right away.”

“Hmm...” I considered his offer, then nodded. “I guess I’ll leave them to you,

then.” I was admittedly a little worried about letting Lemn hold on to them, but it’s not like we needed all six at once, so it was probably fine. He could take charge of the other four.

Lemn grabbed the remaining jars on the table, handling them none too delicately, and tossed them into a nearby shadow.

Man, that ability looks so useful. I’m jealous.

“So, now that healing’s out of the way...” I shifted the subject to my next concern about the battle ahead. “Do you have something like a really strong weapon? That’s what I was expecting.”

“Hm...” Lemn thought, tilting his head to the side. “I have a bunch of things, but I feel like you’re stronger just using your bare hands.”

I thought we were going to be rolling in legendary swords and stuff when he said we were going to gather up dungeon-made weapons. But weapons like holy swords probably wouldn’t agree with my constitution. I could probably use something like a sword of evil, though.

After a moment lost in thought, Lemn turned back to me and said, “I can’t think of anything offhand that you could use... Do you have anything in mind that you’d want?”

Something I want? Well, I shouldn’t ask for something too ridiculous and cause this god any trouble, I thought, as I began creating a mental wish list of things that might just exist.

“I want a sword that shoots out a beam of light when I’m at full health.”

“I don’t have anything like that. That’s not even a real sword.”

“What about an arrow that can awaken a hidden ability if you survive being shot by it?”

“No... What does that even mean?”

“Then I’ll just take a transformation belt.”

“I don’t have that either... What are all of those things?”

What the hell, don't you have anything cool? I made sure to suggest things that had a good chance of existing in a world like this. On top of that, three of my dreams that I've secretly harbored have been utterly crushed. This is truly not what I expected. I'm so disappointed.

As I stood there, deeply saddened, Patrick asked, "What about that sword? The one you already have."

"Oh, that one..." I dismissed it. "I think it's just a sturdy sword."

Patrick was referring to my beloved dark-type sword. The sword, which I had obtained after numerous rounds of dungeon farming, was indeed rare because it was a dark-type item. However, the primary advantage of an elemental weapon was that it allowed the wielder to attack with an element that they couldn't otherwise use. A dark-type sword wasn't very beneficial to me as a dark magic user.

That sword... Where did I put it? I know it's somewhere in my room.

Lemn looked confused, being unaware of the sword we were talking about.

"That sword? What are you talking about?"

"Let me bring it out." Since he was here, I decided to have Lemn appraise it. I got up and went to my room to grab the sword.

After several minutes of rummaging, I found it collecting dust at the bottom of my closet. Sword in hand, I returned to the room where Patrick and Lemn waited. It had taken a while to locate it—I'd forgotten that I'd tried to stash it somewhere that Eleanora couldn't find it.

"I've brought it."

I showed Lemn the sword, which was completely black from its handle to its sheath. The boy god's face went completely blank. He squinted at the blade in my hands.

"Are those gardening shears...?"

What does he mean by gardening shears? I thought, my gaze following his out of curiosity, tracing the blade with my eyes.

The sword itself was a standard bastard sword—the kind that was shorter

than a two-handed sword, but longer than a one-handed sword. I only used it one-handed.

“They’re not shears, are they?” I asked, feeling oddly anxious about the status of my sword.

“This... Where did you get this?” Lemn demanded.

“From the dungeon in Valius... Is it something I shouldn’t have?”

“Well, that’s not really the issue. There should be no problem with humans using it... But does it work okay? It doesn’t have the key either.” Lemn’s voice gradually became quieter, as if he was unsure of what he was saying.

I had been using the sword for quite a while, but my only impression of it was that it was a perfectly normal sword, albeit one that was durable enough to withstand my strength. I gripped the handle and unsheathed it, wanting to give the blade a look as well.

Lemn fell abruptly out of his chair and began crawling backwards.

“Hey!” he protested. “That’s dangerous!”

“Oh, sorry.” I’d never seen such an intense reaction from him before.

Is this sword really that dangerous?

“It’s rare to see a dark-type sword, but it’s really an ordinary weapon besides that,” I reassured him. “Can you at least tell me a little bit about it? You must know something.”

“That sword is not something that should exist in this world. It must have slipped into this world from someplace else.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Like I said before, there shouldn’t be any problems with a regular human using it,” Lemn said, speaking slowly, as if carefully choosing each word. “I knew of its existence, but this is my first time actually seeing it.”

It appeared that I had managed to obtain an item that shouldn’t have dropped in the dungeon at all, perhaps through some bug. I had thought that I was unlucky in my dungeon drops, but maybe I was actually incredibly lucky.

“So... What exactly is this sword?” I asked, hoping for an answer as direct as my question.

This god seemed to only disclose information when it would be helpful for him, so getting him to say anything useful about this sword was going to be quite the chore. If it was safe, I would keep using it as I’d been doing. If it was dangerous, I needed to take the proper steps to handle it, like putting it somewhere high up where my dear Eleanora couldn’t reach it.

Oh wait, I can just hide it at the top of my closet.

“That sword is...” Lemn said solemnly, beginning to speak as soon as I had reached this important conclusion. “It’s a sacred instrument used to manage the world...or rather, *all* of the parallel worlds. It’s a sword that can cut away unnecessary worlds, like pruning excess branches. This blade is literally god’s gardening shears... A sword that’s really a secateur.”

“A secateur...”

“A god that ranks above me is supposed to have possession of this sword. I think it will remain a regular sword for as long as you don’t have the key that unleashes its power.”

“What...?” I asked, awed.

“Yeah... It’s something much too big for a human to have. If you like, I can hold on to it,” Lemn offered, misconstruing my feelings.

“I can’t...” My eyes glazed over a little as I contemplated the sword. “If I have something as powerful as this, my inner middle schooler will be awakened. Heh, heh heh...” A strange laugh slipped through my lips.

Come on. Gardening shears that cut off worlds? A sword whose power can only be unleashed with a hidden key? Secateur? This is bad. I thought being an edgelord was like the measles: if you get it once, you develop immunity. Apparently that isn’t the case. The disease of being an edgelord is more like the flu, with countless strains.

Chill out, me, I admonished myself. *You’re going to end up creating some embarrassing memories at this age. There’s already one bard out there spreading the story of an edgelord that’s based off you.* I took a deep breath

and calmed myself down. *Okay... I'm all right now.*

"I'm okay," I said, nodding reassuringly to Patrick and Lemn, who were giving me some serious side-eye after hearing my creepy laugh. "I'll be able to suppress the curse."

"Um... I don't really understand, but good luck with that," Lemn responded doubtfully.

"You're thinking something ridiculous again, aren't you, Yumiella?" Patrick asked, seeing right through me like he always did.

You know... What I said just now also made me sound like an edgelord.

As I struggled to keep a creepy grin from reappearing on my face, Lemn pointed at the sword, seeming a little frightened.

"I'll hold on to that, then... Okay?"

"There's a part of me that still wants to have it..." I protested. "I might need it in a dire situation."

"If I hold on to it, you won't have to have it on you at all times."

Le mn's offer made sense too. If I was going to leave it at the top of my closet anyway, I might as well have the god of darkness carry it, so he could hand it to me at any moment.

The thing is, Lemn seems like he'll only give it to me in an emergency, instead of handing it over whenever I ask for it.

As I agonized over what to do, Lemn continued to push me to bequeath the sword to him. Lemn was probably being so aggressive because he wanted to be the one to watch over something so dangerous.

"Hmm..." I considered.

"I can pop it out of my shadow instantly," Lemn wheedled.

Pop it out of his shadow? I can see it now, me calling out to him, "Le mn!" He appears right beside me, and he whispers, "Summon authorized," and his shadow begins shaking, and the secateur appears. No, no, wait, it should be a more elaborate performance. He should manipulate the shadows, and make it

look like the sword is being pulled out from his body; that would be super cool. I'm so inspired by this idea.

"I'll leave it with you," I finally agreed. "But under one condition."

"What is it...?"

"I would like you to do a special performance whenever you take it out."

Lemn was silent for a moment before finally saying, "Leave it to me!"

Since he agreed, I handed the sword over to him right away. I should have known then—that he had enthusiastically responded without knowing what he'd agreed to.

Interlude 3: Yumiella

The Royal Capital of the Kingdom of Valschein, known widely as one of the most bustling cities in any of the surrounding kingdoms, was completely empty, without any signs of life.

A lone girl stood on a balcony of the Royal Palace, looking over the now-devastated townscape. Her face was hidden by her long bangs, making her expression difficult to read. Looking over the deserted streets, it was apparent that there weren't any other humans left who could give her the haircut she so desperately needed.

The black-haired girl looking down at the Royal Capital was the very person who had destroyed not only this kingdom, but all of humankind. Her name was Yumiella Dolkness.

"Where did I go wrong...?" she mumbled.

"Do you actually think you did something wrong?" Despite the evidence that there was no one left in this deserted world who could respond, there was a reply to Yumiella's words. The voice was garbled, and the speaker's age and gender were unclear.

"Well, I'm probably in the wrong," Yumiella calmly replied, seeming unsurprised to hear a voice from an invisible owner.

"Do you regret controlling monsters and exterminating humans?"

"How could I have any regrets or repentance after all that happened? I'm not the only one who made the wrong choices. Everyone around me did too... Everything in the world was wrong. That's how we ended up here."

"That's right!" Yumiella's conversational partner exclaimed, their voice gaining vigor. "These worlds are all wrong. That's why I'm going to free them."

Ugh, he doesn't shut up when he gets like this, Yumiella thought wearily. Although she didn't know his identity, she did know his moods. She thought back on her life—her life until this moment, riddled as it was with mistakes,

both her own and others’.

The first mistake was that she had ever been born. Yumiella resented the fact that she had been given a life, and she resented even more the appearance she had been born with and the circumstances she’d been born into. If only her hair were any other color than black, if only she hadn’t been born into the nobility, if only she had been born into a kingdom where black hair wasn’t so reviled. She daydreamed about the various “if onlys,” but nothing could reverse what had already been.

“I was pretty foolish in the past,” she mumbled.

As a child, Yumiella had been desperate for her parents’ love. She’d believed that the sadness she’d felt for as long as she could remember would melt away with affection from her father and mother—she’d longed for strict but kind parents, but she only ever saw them in stories.

She’d believed she would see her parents one day, and she’d imagined the way they would greet her with a warm hug when they reunited. She’d never doubted that. Those fantasies had sustained her until she entered the Academy, motivating her to study hard while she was in Dolkness County.

While she was a student, she’d continued to chase dreams that would never come true. On the inside, she’d looked down with disdain on the duke’s daughter, who was manipulated by those around her to do what they wanted, but outwardly, Yumiella still fawned upon her. In order to stay in the faction, she’d volunteered to do the dirty work. That had drawn the attention of the royal family, and her faction consequently dismissed her.

All of her hopes had been destroyed. The truth was, there had never been any hope from the very beginning. She realized this obvious truth around her third year at the academy. Right around then, news of the Demon Lord’s resurrection spread across the kingdom.

The Demon Lord was a new source of hope for Yumiella. The Demon Lord surely would do something about the people that had continuously treated her cruelly, this poor excuse for a kingdom, and the world that had no value in its existence—surely the Demon Lord would destroy it all.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have relied on someone else to help me,” she reflected in a flat voice, as if she were speaking about a stranger.

She had lost hope once again. The Demon Lord had been defeated, and the new hero and saintess were praised by the entire kingdom.

Yumiella knew then that she couldn’t trust others. The only person she could rely on was herself. She’d made a decision: she would destroy the world in place of the Demon Lord who had let her down.

Yumiella had known for a long time that she was stronger than the people around her, and that she could use magic of an incredibly strong element. She had known how powerful she was, and she kept it hidden.

She’d never used this power of hers during her childhood or while she was a student, fearing that she would only cause others to be even more terrified of her than they already were. Though she now understood that there was nothing to fear when the world had already cast her out so cruelly, at the time, she was truly terrified of doing anything that would inspire others to hurt her more.

And so, Yumiella began walking the path towards becoming the hidden boss. It was right after this turning point that she first met the figureless voice.

“Hey,” Yumiella abruptly called out to the voice, who was still rambling on and spewing thoughts of resentment.

“...which is why beings that look down on this world definitely exist.”

“Are you listening to me?!”

“They observe as if it’s entertainment and are delighted... Hm? What is it?”

“Never mind...”

He’d been like this since they’d first met. The mysterious, invisible being didn’t care to have anything resembling a real conversation. He just wanted to listen to his own voice.

She didn’t even know his name. Yumiella wasn’t inconvenienced by this, since there was no one else left to talk to anyway, but internally, she referred to him

as the god of evil.

Yumiella thought back to several months ago. The first words he'd said to her were, "You're going to die if you're not careful." He'd warned her that at her current strength, she wouldn't be able to stand up against Alicia and the other heroes, and that she would be killed if she tried.

He'd then suggested a completely ridiculous method of level grinding. It was an incredibly severe method of training, so much so that it seemed impossible that any sort of mortal being had come up with it.

"What's wrong?" the voice asked, shifting into a more conciliatory tone as it snapped Yumiella back to the present. Perhaps he'd noticed her distracted irritation. "We're going to the neighboring world tomorrow, remember?"

"I'll go," Yumiella sighed. "You really don't think about what it's like to be human, do you? I can see how you're the one who would've come up with such a crazy level grinding method."

"You've got that wrong. The method I shared with you wasn't something I thought of."

"What? Who else would?"

"It was *you* who pioneered that method. A you from a parallel world. The same you that you'll be fighting tomorrow."

Yumiella's next opponent was a different version of herself from a parallel world. She had known this for a while, but she hadn't thought that she was *that* ridiculous of a person.

I always assumed she just lived a depressing life until now like I did, but...

Yumiella became curious about this person, although she hadn't expressed any interest in her until now.

"What's my other self like? Is she different from me?"

"She's completely different, and since that's coming from someone who can't tell the difference between humans, you know she must be pretty different. She's also much stronger than you are."

"What? Why don't you just have her kill me, then? You just want more

henchmen who have unlocked their level caps, right?”

“Well... It’s not that simple. The you over there doesn’t have any weaknesses. She doesn’t hate the world like you do. She’s difficult to control.”

Yumiella couldn’t imagine a version of herself that didn’t hate the world. Even if she had the chance to redo her life, she would probably still dislike this world.

“Why is there a version of me like that?”

“Oh, that’s easy. I did it.”

“Explain...?”

“I’ve had my eye on you for a long, long time. Your abilities are some of the most incredible out of all the humans I’ve ever observed. I’ve wanted you as a pawn very badly. But you always die. No matter how much I interfere, that never changes.”

Yumiella recalled her battle with Alicia and the others. The battle to the death against those four had been won by a razor-thin margin. If she hadn’t used that crazy leveling method, she would definitely have died.

They had just been that strong, and they’d had that many advantages against Yumiella.

She returned her attention to the voice.

“So I thought I might as well try something else,” he continued. “I put a different soul into a version of you. It was a weak soul that was skirting the border between dimensions. Doing that goes against every law of the universe, but I was feeling so lost that I tried it anyway.”

“And that’s my opponent, right?”

“Exactly. I can’t believe what I accidentally created. On top of that, she even found something I’d lost. What a shock.”

“What kind of life does she live?”

“She’s the lord of a territory, or something like that, and she spends her days doing nothing. She’s a very boring human.”

“I see,” Yumiella said consideringly, before hastily amending, “...not that I

really care.”

If the other Yumiella had become the lord of a territory, that meant she might have succeeded her father’s title and become a countess. Yumiella couldn’t imagine how things could have turned out so well for her other self.

Yumiella reflected on her life once more. She desperately looked away, pretending not to see it, but there was likely a path where she could have been saved. A helping hand might have been right by her all along, if only she had chosen to see it.

The first option would have been for her to rely only on her own power, without so desperately seeking the approval of those around her. With her strength, she likely could have done very well for herself, especially if she had gone to another kingdom.

Another option would have been to ask those around her for help. Eleanora, whom Yumiella had hated so much, was just a puppet being controlled by those around her. Yumiella didn’t think she had been a bad person. If she had shamelessly asked Eleanora for help, things might have turned out differently.

The last possibility Yumiella could think of was the boy at the Academy who spoke to her from time to time. That boy, who would ask Yumiella if she was having trouble with anything and periodically check in on her, was undeniably a source of hope for her. But the one who had scorned his overtures was none other than Yumiella herself. She didn’t associate with him because he was the son of a margrave, meaning his family had little influence over the centralists of the kingdom.

“But maybe that lack of influence was actually a blessing. His mark was probably much less corrupt than the Royal Capital. I wonder if I could’ve lived peacefully there, away from all of the politics and discrimination... Hey—” Yumiella was about to say the boy’s name, so she covered her mouth. She wasn’t certain of his fate, but he was likely dead as well, swallowed like everyone else by the sea of monsters.

I basically killed him, Yumiella thought.

“What’s wrong? It seems like your will to fight is ebbing again.”

“Of course not. I can’t go back now. I decided that I’m going to kill everyone I don’t like.”

Yumiella was glad she could learn about her other self, the one who lived peacefully in the parallel world. Knowing about this version of herself that was so disturbingly different strengthened her resolve—there was only one being left for her to take down.

Chapter 4: The Hidden Boss Beats Up the Hidden Boss

It was the day after we obtained the elixirs and found out my sword was everything I could've wanted in a sword. We had nothing more that we could do in preparation against my other self. She could be coming to this world tomorrow, next week, or even a year from now. I planned to spend my days until her inevitable arrival as I normally did, organizing documents and visiting villages that were under construction for expansion. But today, I wanted to relax. I felt pretty exhausted after everything that had happened over the past couple of days.

Maybe I'll read a book. It's been a while since I've done that. I could even go out and buy myself a new book as a treat, I thought to myself as I looked through the mansion's library. It was a peaceful, relaxing day. It had been so calm that it seemed like the idea of my other self coming to this world was something that Lemn had dreamed up.

Soon enough, evening fell, and it looked like I would finally get to end a day without anything strange occurring. Less than a second after that thought came to my mind, a voice called out from my shadow.

"Miss! I've confirmed a warp in this dimension! You have to come, right away!" The black-haired god appeared in my shadow, looking agitated.

Huh? She's already here?



I called for Patrick as I ran out of the estate. We had been prepared, so I was able to move out fully equipped at a moment's notice. Eleanora would be staying home, or rather, she would likely demand that she come along as well if we explained the situation, so we'd elected to keep all talk of parallel worlds a secret from her.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“It’s right nearby,” Lemn responded from within my shadow.

“Okay, Ryu can stay back too, then.”

“Why? Wouldn’t that dragon be useful in battle?”

“Excuse me?! Are you trying to make me bring Ryu somewhere dangerous?!”

“Oh, um, I’m sorry.”

I followed Lemn’s directions as if he were my own personal GPS in my shadow, running towards the place he told me to go. Patrick, who had left a little after me, finally caught up with us.

“We didn’t even get a chance to rest, did we?” he panted.

“We really didn’t,” I agreed.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s somewhere not too far,” I said, glancing down at my shadow. “Where is it, Lemn?”

Leinn explained that we would be there in several minutes. It was a location not too far from Dolkness Village. Considering the pace at which we were moving, if we were going to be there in a few minutes, the location must be around where Duke Hillrose had been waiting for me when I encountered him on the day of his failed coup. I wasn’t sure whether I should be grateful or upset that the place to which we were heading was close to town, but still outside it. At the very least, it was nice that it seemed like we would be able to avoid harming the town itself.

It was obvious when we arrived.

Leinn described it as a warp in this dimension, and that’s exactly what it looked like—the space had been warped, and I could see a twisted view of the other side.

“Is this it?” Patrick asked.

“Looks like it,” I said.

We stopped at a distance from the warp. Lemn was still lurking in the shadows. I stared, observing the contorted space.

I want to see it up close. I wonder what would happen if I touched it.

My curiosity was getting the better of me, and I was about to run towards the warp when Patrick grabbed my shoulder.

“Hey, what are you trying to do?”

“I thought I could touch it, just a little bit.”

“That thing is obviously dangerous.”

“Humans have made so much progress because of their endless pursuit of knowledge. Just touching it a little would be fine, don’t you think?” Patrick’s only response was to strengthen his grip on my shoulder.

It’s not like some deadly laser is going to shoot out the second I touch it. I don’t think it would hurt anything if I gave the warp a little poke. I’m sure it’s safer than a demon core, and nuclear scientists touch those all the time without issue.

“Fine, fine,” I grumbled reluctantly. “I can throw a rock at it though, right?”

“Well, I guess...” Patrick directed his next question towards the shadow at my feet. “Would that be okay?”

“It’s probably fine,” Lemn replied offhandedly.

Nice, now that I have permission from the god of darkness himself, let’s throw a rock at it.

I was so curious to see what would happen—would the rock disappear into the parallel world on the other side of the warp? Would it change its trajectory because of the warp in space? Or would the rock not be affected at all?

I picked up a reasonably sized pebble from the ground and tossed it gently at the warp. At the very instant that the rock left my palm, the twisted space of the dimensional warp began to wobble and distort. The waves grew larger, and from within the warp appeared...my other self. It was the Yumiella from the parallel world. The rock hit her smack in the face.

“Oops,” I said under my breath.

“What a brutal welcome...” she murmured.

I’m sorry, it wasn’t on purpose. Please don’t get mad at me.

My other self didn’t appear to be the slightest bit hurt—she was Yumiella, after all. Of course, she looked exactly like me. The only real difference between us was the length of our hair. Her untrimmed black hair completely covered her right eye. The other big difference was our radically disparate fashion choices. This Yumiella wore the same kind of black, gothic-lolita-style dress that I remembered seeing on the hidden boss in the game.

Where did she get that from?

My other self looked at Patrick, then at me. “I see, so that’s what’s going on,” she muttered. “I get it. That makes me like you even less.”

“Excuse me, um... What should I call you?” I asked, keeping a healthy distance between us. I had considered the possibility that she might not be willing to talk to me at all, but she responded at once.

“There’s no way you don’t know my name. I’m Yumiella Dolkness. Call me whatever you want.”

“Wouldn’t things be a bit confusing, since I’m Yumiella too?”

“You’re right,” she snapped. “Why don’t you change your name to ‘idiot,’ then. You certainly look like an idiot.”

“If our faces are the same, though,” I pointed out, “doesn’t that mean we both look like idiots?”

The other Yumiella looked shocked, as if she hadn’t realized that.

Could it be that she’s a little dumb? I decided to properly think about what to call her. *There’s Yumiella Alter, Dark Yumiella, Another Yumiella... Hmm, actually, between the two of us, I feel like I’m the more Alter-Dark-Another version. She’s closer to the original Yumiella in the game, after all. So maybe I should be the one to change my name? But I feel like if I change my name, I’m taking a backseat to her. Maybe we should just keep it simple and use numbers.*

“Let’s use 1 and 2, then,” I suggested. “I’ll be 1 and you’ll be 2.”

“What? Why do I have to take second place to you?”

“Okay, then you’ll be 1 and I’ll be V3.”

Her confusion and annoyance mounted higher. “Why did you skip over 2?! Also, where did the ‘V’ come from?!”

What? Come on. That’s too many complaints. I suggested V3 as an alternative since she didn’t like the strong 1 and the powerful 2. I suppose that, in her defense, skipping over a number is weird. It would also be awkward to deal with if a third me were to show up. In that case, she can be 1 and I’ll be an adjacent number...

“Okay, if you don’t want to skip over numbers, then let’s use 0 and 1. You’ll be 1, and I’ll be Zeronos.”

“Again with the discrepancies! Why is there something extra on your name?!”

“You mean Zeronos? Wait...what is that? I don’t remember hearing that name before, but it makes me feel sad for some reason...”

“You’re the one who brought it up!”

Although I was admittedly messing with her a bit, it wasn’t just for my own amusement, because I was now certain that she was definitely not anything like me. She was a completely different person, with no memories of Japan or its popular television shows. If she had been a Yumiella with memories of the same past life as me, we would’ve been having a throw-down fight over who got to call themselves Zeronos.

“Let’s each say our favorite Rider’s name. You can pick whoever you want, even Amazon or KickHopper.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “I’ll be 2... You’ll be 1.”

“Huh? I guess, if you’re okay with that...”

I was a little disappointed, but perhaps going with something simple like “1” and “2” was the most straightforward solution.

I put my right hand on my hip and lifted up my left arm at an angle as I yelled, “Transform!”

“What are you doing...?” Yumiella 2 asked, her voice cold.

Unable to withstand her withering glare, I looked to Patrick for help, but he, too, was regarding me with disapproval.

Hey, I had to do it. I'm Yumiella 1.

I had to admit, I felt a little embarrassed at reliving my childhood a bit too intensely, but it was time to move on. I cleared my throat dramatically and declared, “Now that we’ve decided what to call each other for practical purposes...am I correct to assume that you’re here for me, 2?”

“That’s right. You’re my target.”

I knew it. She wants to take me down and unlock her level cap.

Yumiella 2, her face still frozen in an expression of evidently perpetual displeasure, turned her attention to Patrick. “So, what’s his deal?”

“I’m—”

As Patrick opened his mouth to introduce himself, I came to a shocking realization—the way 2 looked at him was completely different from how she looked at me. She seemed to be disgusted by my having the gall to take up space in her field of vision at all, but she seemed almost excited whenever her gaze rested on Patrick.

This is... I guess even if we're different people, we're attracted to the same type. This is bad. She has the same face as me. Patrick, who is smitten by my beauty, might even fall for 2. If she's capable of destroying an entire world, surely she'd be willing to steal someone else's boyfriend without even blinking.

All these thoughts ran through my head within two-tenths of a second. I needed to jump in before they could actually have a conversation. I leaped to Patrick’s side, intending to grab on to his arm, but I was a little too forceful and ended up jabbing him in his side with my elbow instead. Patrick let out a pained groan, but I was able to stop them from talking, so I considered this outcome a success.

“He’s my boyfriend, why do you ask? Oh, we’re also engaged. We’re going to get married in a few months.”

“Ow...” Patrick hissed. “What are you doing out of nowhere, Yumiella?”

“See?” I smiled broadly at Yumiella 2, then turned back to Patrick. “Whisper passionate, sweet nothings to me like you always do!”

“Like I...always do?” He seemed at a loss.

I pleaded with my eyes for him to stay quiet. I couldn't let 2 know that this was the first time he'd whispered anything even approaching a sweet nothing. I glanced over at her and saw that she was glaring daggers.

All right, it's working.

“Stop flirting,” 2 commanded in a tone so cold that I could feel my blood solidify in my veins.

“Huh? Did it look like we were flirting? Isn't this normal?” I asked, all innocence. “Oh... I guess you wouldn't know since you don't have a boyfriend. I'm sorry. Also, I'm stronger than you.” The battle had already begun, and I was dominating the early stages.



I knew how deeply the question “Why don’t you get a boyfriend?” could cut. It did bonus damage when the person asking it sounded genuinely confused. The final blow was following it up with a heartfelt apology for asking the question in the first place.

Feel the pain, 2! Even if we know the same kinds of pain, right now, we’re enemies. I won’t hold back.

Yumiella 2 cast down her eyes, her hand tightening into a fist. I started to feel a little embarrassed, so I let go of Patrick’s arm and took a step closer to 2. I bent down so that I could crane my head up to look at her face from below.

“Are you crying? It seems like you’re all alone, but don’t get too down on yourself.” I followed this sympathetic observation up with a quick reminder. “Also, I’m stronger than you.”

“Look there...” she said, gesturing to a point below both of our heads.

Huh? Is there something on the ground? I wondered, as I looked down and scanned the area, but there was nothing there. Right as I was about to ask her what she wanted to show me, I felt an impact from above, followed by a sudden pain running through the back of my head.

I only realized that I had taken a heel kick to the head when my face slammed into the ground.

“Coward...” I grumbled, my voice muffled by the dirt.

“But I thought you were stronger than me?” 2 taunted. “Why don’t you get up already?”

I tried to get up and tell her exactly what I thought about her antisocial behavior, but there was once again an impact to my head from above. It happened again...and again...and again. She persistently continued to stomp on the back of my head, shoving my face deeper into the earth. After a while, 2 finally stopped stomping on me and began grinding her foot against my head instead.

“Did you pass out? You’re all talk—”

“Remember, you’re the one who started this,” I said, reaching behind my

head and grabbing 2's ankle. Even if I was lying on the ground, I could still fight back. Yumiella 2 tried to pull her leg away from my grip...but I wasn't letting her go.

"What is this?" she protested, trying and failing to pull free. "Let go of me. You should just stay right there and roll around on the ground."

"Roll? Got it."

"Ack!"

Just as she'd suggested, I began to roll my body while still holding on to her by the ankle. As soon as I was facing up, I used my other hand to strengthen my hold on her, and then I continued rolling. Unable to endure the momentum of my roll, 2 lost her balance. I continued spinning, using the weight of my body to pull my opponent off her feet. The gothic lolita, badly-in-need-of-a-haircut Yumiella fell face-first into the ground.

"Hell yeah!" I roared, letting out a cry of victory. But the real fight had only just begun.

I leaped to my feet, keeping hold of 2's ankle, and then repeatedly lifted her up and slammed her down, as if I were using Yumiella 2 like a hammer to drive nails into the ground. I did it again...and again...and again.

Of course, I made sure that I was holding her at an angle so that her head would be sure to dig into the earth. I was an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a face in the dirt for a face in the dirt. It was then that Patrick gestured for me to stop.

"That's enough," he said, in a tone that seemed genuinely sad. I ceased swinging 2 against the ground and examined her. The girl before me, lying completely limp on the ground, looked exactly like me... I took a breath and returned my gaze to Patrick.

"It's more painful than I thought it would be to watch two Yumiellas beating each other up..." he explained in a shaky voice.

"Patrick..."

I kind of understand where he's coming from. If I saw an unrestrained battle

between Patrick and someone who looked like Patrick, I would also... Wait. Actually, I would join in on the battle on the side of my Patrick. I mean, even if the other one had the same face, they'd still be someone else entirely.

"Wait, does that mean you're on 2's side?" I asked. "Do you not care who you support, as long as they have my face?"

"No, I just mean I can't bear watching it..."

"I see, so you are siding with 2." I pouted. "She's the one who started it."

"You're also at fault. You taunted her too much when you didn't need to."

I didn't remember taunting anyone. All I had done was establish my emotional dominance over her. I wasn't taunting her, I was merely demonstrating my superiority. Though, now that I put it that way, I wasn't actually sure which option was meaner.

Well... I guess I'm at fault too. Maybe I was the one who baited her into a fight. I won't apologize, though.

I looked away from Patrick, sulking, as 2 dragged herself back to her feet.

"You must think that having a boyfriend makes you special," she said, glaring at me as she tried to fix her outfit.

"Huh?"

"Normal people all over the world have friends and significant others. That's normal. They get married and have kids. That's also normal."

"Uh..." I didn't follow. "Yes, they do?"

"Isn't it pathetic to use something so normal as a demonstration of superiority? You're like a teenager proud of being able to do something as simple as tying their own shoes. That's something only appropriate for a small child to be proud of. Boasting about something any adult can do is the height of being pitiful."

I felt the weight of her words. "You're exactly right..."

I'm gonna cry... The truth hurts even more coming from someone who has the same face as me. I might've been thinking the same thing somewhere deep in

my heart. I taunted her a bunch, and then I sulked when Patrick stopped me. I really do have the worst personality.

As I stood there on the verge of tears, Yumiella 2 continued, the corners of her mouth turning up into a smirk. “Also, people who are actually happy don’t feel the need to show off how happy they are. When I saw you deliberately flirting with your dear boyfriend, I thought, ‘Wow, this relationship isn’t going so well.’”

“We’re doing great...” I protested weakly. “We even have a date for our wedding.”

“So you’ll get married, and then what? Do you think that your relationship will automatically progress once you get married, and things will just go well? Marriage isn’t some kind of magical ceremony, nor is it the end goal of life.”

Don’t criticize marriage when you’ve never been married. You don’t even have a boyfriend... No, it’s too late, I’ve already lost the upper hand that I had based on the fact that I had a boyfriend. Ugh... I can’t say anything back to her.

Using my silence to her advantage, 2 continued to pile on the insults. “I thought it was weird in the first place. I mean, even if we’re ostensibly different people, you’re still me. You’re Yumiella Dolkness. There’s no way you’re capable of having a proper relationship. Your feelings are probably being manipulated by that margrave’s kid.”

I was about to look at Patrick, to see if he really was deceiving me and my feelings. But I stopped myself, because I knew that if I did, it would mean that I didn’t trust him. Right now, all of my attention was directed towards Yumiella 2’s face rather than Patrick’s. And all of my intentions were directed towards punching rather than looking.

“Don’t talk badly about Patrick!” I lunged at Yumiella 2, and exactly as I intended, punched her right in the face. I bowled her over entirely with the force of my attack, pushing her down to the ground, then I sat on top of her and continued to punch her with alternating fists.

Yumiella 2 retaliated from her prone position with punches of her own, but her swings from below weren’t as strong as mine and didn’t hurt a bit.

How futile! Useless, useless, useless!

“Stop it, Yumiella! Don’t you feel bad for Yumiella?” Patrick was quick to stop us once again. He grabbed my shoulder and pulled at me.

Part of why I had used “Don’t talk badly about Patrick!” as my battle cry was that I had been hoping to make him less sympathetic towards the other Yumiella, but my clever strategy seemed like it had been ineffective. Perhaps he’d realized that I had decided to settle things with my fists because I knew that I wouldn’t win with words.

Patrick pulled me completely off 2, who remained on the ground. He held me firmly by my shoulder as 2 and I glared at each other. Finally, I gave in and relaxed, and Patrick let out a heavy sigh.

“Why do you guys so persistently go for each other’s faces?”

“Because I don’t like her face,” we both replied in unison.



For a disconcerting moment, I thought that my voice had developed a mysterious echo, but then I realized that it was because 2 and I had the exact same voice. Regardless of how similar we were, it was abundantly clear that we would never get along. But surprisingly, neither of us had even once made a serious attempt to kill the other yet.

“What do you want to do now?” I asked 2, watching her stand up and dust herself off once again. “It’s going to get dark soon. Do you want to stay over?”

“I don’t want to sleep at your house,” she responded disdainfully.

“Okay, you can camp out here, then. I’ll come again tomorrow?”

“Excuse me?” Now she seemed strangely offended. “Shouldn’t you be begging me to come stay with you?”

Oh, she does want to stay over. But she doesn’t want to owe me any favors. What an annoying personality. I’ll be the bigger person and bow my head, asking her to please come to my home... No way, I don’t want to. Maybe I really should just let her camp out here. By herself. Without a tent.

“What’s your intention here?” Patrick asked, whispering into my ear. “Is it really okay to invite her over?”

“I think it’ll be fine. I’m finding 2 surprisingly friendly.”

“Friendly...?”

“I mean, she hasn’t used magic even once.”

Though we had now beaten each other up a couple of times, 2 and I weren’t seriously hurting one another. If either of us had truly wanted to kill the other, using *Black Hole* as a first move would’ve been the safest bet. Not only had she not used magic, but 2 hadn’t even brought out any weapons. Surely this must mean that she was open to a peaceful discussion. Patrick seemed to understand that as well.

“Oh, I see...” He nodded. “I didn’t think that far after being forced to witness that horrific beatdown...”

“Horrific? Neither of us are bleeding, though.” We weren’t bleeding, nor were

we likely to have any scars or bruises from today. Admittedly, we hadn't held back our punches completely. It had so far been somewhat-strong Yumiella punches against really strong Yumiella defense. The latter had just been stronger.

While Patrick and I whispered to each other, discussing what to do, 2 seemed to think she was being ignored.

"Fine! I get it!" she snapped, sounding both frustrated and slightly nervous. "Please let me stay at your house. There, are you happy?"

"I wouldn't actually let you camp out here alone..." I started to reassure her, and then reconsidered her reasons for being so standoffish. "Oh, are you maybe too used to being alone? Ha, even I'm not that much of a social reject."

"I'll kill you," 2 said, leaping forward to punch me once again.

This time she tried to get on top of me, but wanting to have the advantage, I caught her and flipped her over. We both ended up on the ground, switching between being above and below, trying to hit each other as we rolled around in the dirt. As the earth and sky scrolled by my field of vision, continuously interchanging, I could hear Patrick's voice somewhere above us.

"I'm not even going to bother trying to stop you guys anymore. You're both equally at fault for everything."

Aren't you being a little too easy on Yumiella 2, Patrick? There's me, your fiancée, and 2, who you just met. You should obviously be taking your fiancée's side, no? Is it because of her face? That must be it. There's no doubt that 2 is exactly Patrick's type as far as her appearance goes. But even if she has the same face, he shouldn't be... Did she maybe seduce him without me noticing?

Spurred on by these thoughts, I elected to add insults to the injuries I was already inflicting.

"Don't come on to Patrick, you one-eyed gothic lolita!" I hissed.

"What?! I've done no such thing!" she protested. "You're just a lousy girlfriend!"

"Says the person with no dating experience."

“All you’ve been talking about is dating and romance... Is your mind just a field of flowers?”

“No, it’s not!” I immediately thought better of shooting down her suggestion. “That’s not to say that I’m not a young maiden who would fit right in in a field of flowers, though!”

“Excuse me?! You expressionless freak! It’s unsettling how I can’t tell what you’re thinking!”

“The same goes for you too! That makes the both of us expressionless freaks!”

“Your appetites must be as bland as your vacant face. I bet you can’t eat bell peppers either! You have the palate of a child!”

“I *can* eat them, so there...” I smugly responded. “But you don’t look good in that frilly dress!”

“Really? That’s great for you... Your taste in fashion is boring!”

Our rolling battle of insults continued apace, but after a while, both 2 and I started to run out of things to say.

“Stupid!”

“Idiot!”

Why are we doing this? I wondered, as we rolled across the ground. Then, without either of us actually saying anything, we both abruptly stopped punching each other. *I can’t even remember what I was upset about.*

“Why did we end up doing this...?” I asked.

“Who knows? I’ve forgotten.” 2 didn’t know the reason for our fighting either.

We both got up and faced each other, tilting our heads in the same direction, mirroring each other’s movements. I tried raising my right arm, and she raised her left arm. I waved my raised arm, and she waved back.

“Oh, it’s just like a mirror,” we both mumbled. We were perfectly in sync. All I needed now was some balls—one that bounced and one that didn’t—so that I could replicate that cool trick where it looked like you were bouncing a ball

through a mirror. Maybe 2 and I could go viral. I looked around to see if there was anything else I could use in place of the balls, and as I scanned the ground for some likely looking rocks, my eyes met Patrick's; he was standing a little to the side, watching us.

"Do you guys get along?" he asked curiously. "Or do you not?"

"We don't," I replied.

"Isn't it obvious?" 2 added on.

If you were to use any common sense, you would know that you obviously wouldn't beat up someone you considered a friend. I was lost as to what made Patrick think that 2 and I could possibly get along. The atmosphere between us was clearly stormy. First of all, getting along with someone who looked like me was impossible. It was also unpleasant that our personalities were kind of similar, even though we were supposed to be different people. She was probably thinking something along the same lines.

Ugh, I hate this.

The sun had set while we were fighting. I wanted to get home before it got pitch-black.

"Let's go home, then," I said with a sigh. "You're coming too, right, 2?"

"Only because you insisted."

Did I? I mused. I felt like she had been the one to ask to stay, but if I pointed this out, then it was possible that we would start punching each other again. *I'll stay quiet about this one.*

"It's not like you've never been there," I reminded her. "You lived at the Dolkness estate before too, right?"

"I don't have any attachments to that place. I just stayed in my room and spent my days sleeping, getting up, and eating. The person I spoke to the most was the tutor that visited me."

"Oh, I wasn't too different not that long ago. I basically did that at the Academy dorms too. There wasn't anywhere to go back to, right?"

“I see,” she said quietly. “I almost forgot that you’re also Yumiella.”

“What? Of course I am.”

“Then why... You and I are... Never mind, it’s nothing,” Yumiella 2 mumbled, looking towards the distance. I looked the same way, wondering whether she was looking at something, but there was nothing out there but the dark sky.

We headed home wreathed in awkward silence. Ever since 2 appeared, Patrick had seemed slightly down, and Lemn had stayed silently hidden in my shadow. Yumiella 2 herself made it abundantly clear that she was in a foul mood. Even I felt gloomy.

So, how should I explain who 2 is to everyone at home? I can’t say that she’s destroyed a world, and it would be pushing it to try and pretend she’s someone who looks exactly like me that I met by coincidence. I don’t even know if I should let Eleanora meet her. The only reason I’m being friendly with 2 right now is that she doesn’t currently seem like a threat. And I know that even if things are okay for the moment, we’ll eventually have to fight to the death.

Even though Patrick and I could put our feelings aside and understand that this was a doomed situation with an inevitable bad ending, Eleanora might not understand that.

We walked silently through the town of Dolkness, Patrick and I side by side as 2 followed behind. We chose a path that generally saw less traffic, and luckily we didn’t pass by anyone else. No one was around to realize that I was the countess, nor that there was someone who looked exactly like me, and even if there had been anyone about to see, they wouldn’t have recognized us thanks to the dim light of the evening. Because of our high levels, the three of us were probably the only ones in the whole county who could see in the dark as clearly as if it were daytime.

The mansion came into view—we were already close to home.

I should’ve taken a longer route and bought myself more time to think. I haven’t figured out how I’m going to explain to anyone at home who 2 is.

I wasn't sure why, but it felt like things would go badly if I brought her into my estate, even though I was the one who'd suggested it. I'd had relatively peaceful interactions with 2 up to this point, fighting and playing the mirror game, but if I brought her into the manor, it felt like something fundamental would change.

I can still turn back, I thought, fully not wanting to go home as I stared at the walls of the mansion growing ever taller as we approached ever closer. Just then, an incredibly adorable face popped out from the shadows of my backyard. The large, scaly head craned over the roof of the mansion, scanning the three of us and finding me at once.

"Ryuu! I'm home!" I exclaimed.

My dear Ryuu was as cute as he always was. He was cute yesterday, and he would surely be cute tomorrow. I couldn't admit that I didn't want to go home, even if someone had put a gun to my head, when such an adorable dragon was there. Who cared about Yumiella 2? I could just say that I found her somewhere. And I would kick her out of my house at once if she were ever to do something detrimental to Ryuu's happiness.

Freed of my worries, I ran towards Ryuu. My concerns had been ridiculous. Almost everything in the world was un concerning when compared to how adorable Ryuu was. Ryuu welcomed me home with equal enthusiasm, effortlessly flying over the two-story estate with a single flap of his wings and landing in the front yard between us and the front door of the mansion.

Even though we saw each other every day, and even though we had seen each other just a few hours ago, each time we reunited after an absence of any length, Ryuu would get just as excited as if we hadn't seen each other in years. I responded to his excitement with full force.

Ryuu craned his neck down to lower his head, which I attacked with affection at once. I began aggressively petting his chin.

"Ryuu! You're such a good boy! You're such a good boy for welcoming us home! You're such a good boy for purring!"

This was pure bliss. Hearing the rumbling sound Ryuu's throat made was life. Watching his cute gestures? Life. I'd continue living if for no other reason than

to rub my face against his slightly cool scales. My past, present, and future were all for Ryu. As I luxuriated in this healing time with Ryu, I heard voices from behind me.

Oh, that's right, I thought dismissively. *There's some rando called Yumiella 2 over there*. I listened to her and Patrick talk, but I didn't pay their words much mind.

"What the hell am I looking at?" 2 asked.

"Um, that's..." Patrick trailed off, at a loss. "You just have to accept it and get used to it."

"What about *that* did you fall in love with? Are you crazy?"

"Well, I probably *am* somewhat crazy..."

I reluctantly let go of Ryu and turned back to my companions. Yumiella 2 was openly staring Ryu up and down. Ryu also noticed her, and his eyes widened in surprise. He looked back and forth between 2 and me.

Right, of course you'd be surprised by seeing someone who looks just like me.

I wasn't certain that 2 was worthy of Ryu's majesty, but I decided to introduce my son, my pride and joy, to her anyway.

"This is Ryu. Isn't he cute?"

"A dragon that's friendly to people..." She sniffed disdainfully. "Gross."

How could she say that? I thought. I quickly looked to Ryu, who seemed sad that someone who looked just like me had called him gross.

"Hey! How could you say something so horrible?!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize he understood human language."



“Ryuu, don’t worry about her. We’re different people, I promise!” I comforted him.

My poor baby, he’s so upset. Yumiella 2 and I are irreconcilable after all, I thought as I stroked Ryuu’s adorable head and glared at her.

“Ugh, my bad,” 2 amended, somewhat reluctantly. “Your pet isn’t so bad.”

“Excuse me?!” I sprang to Ryuu’s defense. “He’s my *family*, not my pet!”

“I see, your family... Oh, what does he eat, then? What’s his feed?”

“What?! He doesn’t eat ‘feed’! He’s not an animal. He eats normal food!”

She snorted dismissively. “You’re so annoying.”

Not only did she insult Ryuu, but now she’s saying I’m annoying? A fight can’t be avoided. I’m gonna pummel her! Pummel!

I couldn’t not use magic anymore. The best first move in a Yumiella vs. Yumiella battle was *Black Hole*, after all. If I destroyed Yumiella 2, leaving no trace of her, then all of our problems would be solved.

I win! The third volume comes to an end!

Suddenly, I heard a pathetic sound from behind me. I looked back and saw Ryuu with sadness in his eyes, whining piteously at me. I could tell what he was trying to say—he was asking us not to fight because of him.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. “I’m sorry for being such a violent mother. You’re right, it’s not right to solve things with violence. You’re such a kind boy, Ryuu.”

“What the hell am I witnessing?” 2 grumbled.

And so, our final battle was delayed.

You’re lucky Ryuu is so kind. Anyway, I can’t cuddle with Ryuu out here forever. We should head inside.

“Yumiella?” a voice called out to me, a voice that I absolutely did not want to hear. “I was worried since you left so suddenly.”

Uh-oh, Eleanora found us. I wonder how I should explain this to her, I thought as I looked at 2, who seemed displeased. *Oh, of course she knows who Eleanora*

is.

“Why is the duke’s daughter here?” she complained.

“A lot of things happened and the nobility of the Hillrose family was revoked...” I explained. “Now she’s like...a freeloader?”

“What? What does that—” 2 tried to ask for a more thorough account, but we likely wouldn’t be able to have a conversation like that for a while. Now that Eleanora was here, we would be marching to her drum.

Eleanora followed my voice right to us, but she made a beeline for 2 instead of me, since I was half hidden in Ryu’s shadow.

I’m sure she’ll notice the difference in hairstyle and clothes once she’s up close
—

“Oh my! What a wonderful dress!” Eleanora gushed. “Where did you get this? You usually hate wearing frills. Oh no, your hair has grown so much in the short time that I haven’t seen you. We must get it cut soon.”

She’s not noticing.

Eleanora walked around 2, who seemed irritated, trying to inspect her gothic lolita dress.

“Hey, you’re too close!” 2 snapped. “Get away from me!”

“Just as I thought, you look lovely in black as well, Yumiella! You look truly magnificent!”

“Hey! I’m not the Yumiella you know!”

“I know that very well. I’m very happy that I get to see a side of you I’ve never seen before!” Lady Eleanora’s mind was as dense as a brick wall, utterly oblivious to negativity. It reaffirmed that Ryu, who had been so hurt by 2’s harsh words, was a very sensitive boy.

I was starting to feel bad for Yumiella 2, so I tapped Eleanora on the shoulder—taking the full brunt of Eleanora’s enthusiasm required serious fortitude.

“Um, I’m over here.”

“What? Yumiella?”

“I’m the usual Yumiella. The other one is...a doppelgänger.”

Eleanora looked at me, then at 2, silently comparing us.

I just blurted it out, but maybe she wouldn’t believe—

“You really do look alike!” she said wonderingly. “I can’t tell you apart at all!”

“Huh?”

Wait, really? You’re just gonna believe that? I think you’re past the bounds of simple naivete if you believe that sorry excuse.

“It’s nice to meet you, Yumiella’s doppelgänger. I’m Eleanora. What’s your name?”

“Yumiella.”

“Wow!” she cried with an artless and genuine excitement. “Even your names are the same! What an amazing coincidence!”

I might have been underestimating the tenacity of Lady Eleanora’s innocence. I unironically thought she was incredible. I recalled the time when I used to still believe in Santa, and I wondered when I had lost that kind of purity.

Eleanora began examining 2 once again. In order to see well in the dimness, she brought her face in quite close, enough that her nose was almost touching the other Yumiella. In contrast, 2 was turning away with a scowl. She could have pushed Eleanora away if she had really wanted to, but she was just letting Eleanora have her way. I couldn’t help but feel like maybe 2 wasn’t that bad of a person after all, but then, she *did* destroy an entire world.

“Hey, do something about this!” 2 complained, negating her previous patience with a glare at me.

“Oh! Your manner of speaking is slightly different,” Eleanora observed. “I feel like I’ll be able to tell the difference once I talk to you a bit more!”

“Lady Eleanora, my doppelgänger seems to be troubled,” I said, taking Eleanora gently by the shoulders and peeling her off Yumiella 2. Eleanora seemed reluctant, but she didn’t resist. I continued holding her by the shoulders as I guided her towards the mansion. “Let’s go inside now.” I turned to Ryuu.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t play with you that much.”

Though it pained me to do so, we left Ryu behind and headed inside. As soon as we entered, Rita welcomed us home.

“Welcome back. Dinner is ready. Would you like to sit down to your meal at once?”

“Oh, about that, would it be possible to prepare an extra seat?” I asked Rita. “We have a guest.”

“That should be fine, but...a guest?” Rita’s eyes widened in astonishment at this unusual occurrence. It was only natural for her to be surprised; we rarely had guests.

Yeah, maybe I should start expanding my circle of acquaintances.

There were footsteps behind me—2 and Patrick joined us in the foyer.

Rita bowed reflexively in greeting, but when she lifted her head, she froze upon catching sight of the guest in question.

“Welcome... What? Lady Yumiella?”

“So you’re here too,” she said. “I expected it, but it really is all familiar faces. Did you quit being an errand girl to the master and mistress? You chose to side with the stronger one, I see?”

Yumiella 2 apparently didn’t like Rita either.

I guess it can’t be helped if their relationship didn’t advance past where ours started out. Rita did attempt to poison me, after all.

Going by what I knew of the other me’s life, she likely only ever saw Rita as a mouthpiece for 2’s negligent parents. Things would’ve been the same between Rita and me if it weren’t for the time I caught her trying to assassinate me. But it didn’t seem fair for 2 to direct her frustrations towards this world’s Rita. I was about to defend my head servant, who seemed completely at a loss, when 2 spoke up.

“I’m sorry...” she said, dropping the attitude. “The you here doesn’t have anything to do with what happened to me.”

Rita's eyes swam in confusion at having just been berated and then immediately apologized to by someone who looked exactly like me. She probably wasn't sure what she should say.

"Rita, this person is our guest," I began. "She's just...someone who looks like me. Oh, also, I'm sorry for the trouble, but could you prepare the guest room as well?"

"If you insist, Lady Yumiella..."

"Thank you."

Yumiella 2 was obviously not just someone who looked like me, but Rita nodded and obliged without question. She didn't share the quality of Eleanora's remarkable obliviousness, but her trust in me made her willing to go along with the situation without question.



We headed to the dining room and sat down to dinner. Arrayed around the table were Two Yumiellas, One Patrick, and One Eleanora. If you considered nothing but the names of those present, nothing would have seemed out of the ordinary.

I meditatively slurped a spoonful of stew as I observed my other self, who was elegantly partaking in the meal while doggedly attempting to ignore Eleanora's burning stare.

Man, not only do we look alike, but even our movements are similar. Wait, no, I'm just the tiniest bit more graceful.

"I'm not sure how to phrase this, but..." Eleanora began, her gaze still trained upon my counterpart. "This Yumiella seems to have more class."

"I'm much classier!" I protested.

"Hey, can you not yell while others are trying their best to eat?" 2 complained. "Is this a gathering of barbarians?" The classy 2 allowed her lips to settle into a condescending smile.

I can't stay silent if she's going to call me a barbarian. We should settle this with another fistfight... Oh, now that I think about it, that's a pretty barbaric

idea.

I sat there and gritted my teeth, unable to come up with any kind of nonbarbaric retort.

Yumiella 2 sighed. “I haven’t had a warm meal in a while, so can I just savor it a little?”

“What have you been eating until now...?” I asked curiously.

“There are a plethora of foods that can be preserved.”

It was true that there were nonperishable foods used by the military forces of this world, as well as foods with a long shelf life. But unlike in modern Japan, this world hadn’t figured out any methods of canning, and preservation methods were simple. Most shelf-stable foods were overly salty dried meats, or hard breads that were made without flavor in mind—generally, nonperishables were considered disgusting, and rightly so.

“You should’ve cooked for yourself,” I admonished her.

“Why do you think I can cook?” 2 asked. “You can’t either, can you?”

“I can cook,” I refuted.

“Liar.”

These kinds of differences are probably why I have a boyfriend and she doesn’t, I thought with an internal sigh. *Even I can cook. It’s a necessary skill for hot girls.*

Just a short while ago, I had prepared a wonderful meal made with lots of love for Patrick. He’d ended up in bed for three days, and I’d ended up banned from entering the kitchen, but surely this was proof enough that I could cook.

You should tell 2 all about that since she went straight to assuming I lied, I thought as I gave Patrick a significant look, but he cast his eyes in every direction except mine. *Huh...? Well, Eleanora didn’t eat any of it, but she saw what I made.* I turned my attention to her, but she also averted her gaze. *Why doesn’t anyone have my back on this?*

Yumiella 2 smiled triumphantly. “See, you’re a liar after all.”

“I’m not lying.” I pouted. Yumiella 2, who probably couldn’t even boil water, looked at me with pity.

I totally can cook. I would show her right now if I weren’t banned from the kitchen.

As we sat there, chewing in awkward silence, I was forced to remind myself that Yumiella 2 really had actually destroyed her entire world. She was living alone in an empty realm. It was surprisingly depressing to hear that she hadn’t even had a warm meal in a while.

I knew I should’ve been feeling much worse for all of the people that had died as a direct result of her actions, but I couldn’t help but empathize with Yumiella 2.

She wasn’t a bad person. I mean, sure, she had definitely committed an irredeemable, terrible crime, but at her core she wasn’t evil. She clearly knew the difference between right and wrong, and she wasn’t just indiscriminately spewing her hate at everyone around her now that she was in my world.

As I watched her silently eat, she seemed much more docile than I was...

I’d thought that this matter would be settled by defeating the hidden-bossified Yumiella, but now? There wasn’t a resolution in sight.



We didn’t really talk much for the rest of dinner, and Yumiella 2 quickly finished her meal and retired to the guest room, saying she was tired. Patrick and I headed to my chambers, where the topic of conversation immediately turned to our guest.

“She’s not what I expected at all,” I sighed. “If she were more like, I don’t know, a cackling, wicked villain or something, this would’ve been a heck of a lot easier to deal with.”

“I agree, she’s much too...” He couldn’t seem to find the right word, but I knew what he was trying to say.

“Maybe we should just have her move here...” I shook my head. “Hm, that

doesn't really seem right either."

I sympathized with Yumiella 2, but I wasn't sure if it was right (or even possible) to forgive her for her misdeeds. The destruction of a whole world was much too grave a sin to just sweep under the rug. I couldn't even imagine how she'd begin to atone for such a crime.

"I think she's a lot like how you were when we first met," Patrick said. "She seems like she keeps herself aloof from everyone around her, including herself, as if she's observing her own life from the outside in. It's almost as if she doesn't consider herself to be part of the world around her..."

"I guess I might have been like that in the past. I always thought that if things got bad enough, I could just flee this kingdom."

That was how I had felt a long time ago, but things were different now—these days, I had too many precious things that I needed to protect. I didn't have anything back then. Even if I had cut off all the people in my life and fled the kingdom, I would have had very little to lose. She was probably in the same situation. She didn't have anything or anyone, which left her completely adrift.

"You know, thinking back on the things she's said to us so far, do you think 2 feels bad about what she did? Does she understand that what she did is wrong?"

"She definitely does," Patrick immediately responded. He always made it clear when something was just his opinion or an assumption, so it was surprising for him to state that so definitively. "There's no way that she thinks what she did was right," he continued. "She's seen you. She's seen a different outcome her life could've had, so..."

"The only reason our lives turned out differently is because of my memories of my previous life," I pointed out.

"That shouldn't matter to her. She's seen that there's a Yumiella Dolkness leading a happy life. That fact in itself should be enough."

I see. My existence itself proves that everything in her life was a terrible mistake. Even if it wasn't my intention, my life is basically saying that all of her efforts were meaningless, that she made a string of horrifically wrong decisions.

If she had just made a couple of different choices, perhaps she could have at the very least avoided the worst outcome. She could've even been more successful than I am if she'd played her cards right. All because of a handful of small differences between us.

"I'm... I'm just a little bit smarter, and a little bit more feminine, and a little more sociable, and more than anything, I'm a bit stronger than her, and those are the only real differences between us..."

Patrick snorted. "Wasn't this a serious conversation...?"

"Huh? This *is* a serious conversation. Putting aside whatever 2 was thinking about the destruction of her world until now, we're discussing how meeting me forced her to realize that she undoubtedly made the wrong choice, right?"

Patrick seemed to be keeping his face carefully neutral. *We're having a really serious conversation right now*, I grumbled internally. *What's wrong with him?*

He cleared his throat as if he were collecting himself. "Well, let's drop the differences between you two for now. I was thinking that 2 might...try to escape all this."

"Escape...? Like she would run away from me, back to her old world?"

"No, that's not what I meant."

After committing such a heinous crime and giving up on absolutely everything, where was a girl like her with nothing to hold on to supposed to run?

"What do you mean, then?" I asked Patrick, who seemed hesitant to explain. "What is she escaping from?"

"From living..."

"What? No, she wouldn't..."

"Looking at her, I felt like she might disappear at any moment. She has an air of tragedy around her that reminds me of the way you used to be, but there's something different about the way she carries herself. I wouldn't be surprised if she ultimately chose death."

What...? I know this is just a theory on Patrick's part, but I can't say it's

impossible. How foolish would it be for her to destroy her entire world and then die herself, like she's going down with all of humanity?

I recalled the last time I'd seen her today. She had just finished eating, and she'd looked satisfied.

Unable to keep still, I leaped up and ran out of my room.

"I'm going to go check on 2!" I called over my shoulder.

No, don't do it, Yumiella 2! I don't know the answers, I don't know what to do, and I don't have any advice to give, but I do know that dying is the wrong choice.

I ran down the hallway towards the guest room that she had been assigned. It was the largest room in the estate, which was always kept meticulously clean despite the fact that we never had any guests. I had a bad feeling, and I flung the door open without knocking or giving her a chance to respond.

"Are you alive?!" I practically shouted.

"You scared me!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing?"

Yumiella 2 was standing by the window, looking out. Her black hair and the tenebrous night beyond the window blended into each other, and for a moment it looked like she really was going to disappear into the darkness.

Could it be... Is she trying to jump out of the window?!

"No!" I cried.

"Huh? What? What are you trying to do?"

I ran across the room to 2 and held her from behind so she couldn't jump, gripping her arms tightly. Yumiella 2 resisted with all her might, thrashing around to try and free herself from my restricting embrace.

You want to throw yourself out the window that badly? I won't let you!

I continued to hold her as I dragged her away from the window, letting her go only when I was satisfied that we had retreated to a distance that made autodefensation impossible.

“I thought I was going to die,” she panted, working to catch her breath.

“So you were planning to die after all.”

“Excuse me? I’m talking about how you almost killed me.”

“Huh? I thought you were going to throw yourself out the window because you were tired of living.”

Wait, did I misunderstand something? Actually, in this case I think I can blame Patrick for this particular misunderstanding. I felt embarrassed by my presumption, but also relieved that my counterpart was not, in fact, contemplating death.

“First of all, there’s no way I would die jumping out a window at this height,” 2 pointed out with a theatrical sigh.

“Oh...” She was right. I had panicked for no reason, though I didn’t really feel as if it was a wasted effort on my part since I had been able to confirm that she wasn’t planning on dying.

“Also, when I do die, I’m planning on bringing down some despicable fiends along with me. Doesn’t that sound amusing?” she asked with a laugh that could only be described as a cackle. I guess she *was* evil after all.

Is there even anyone for her to bring down with her? There aren’t any people left in her world.

“I mean, do you even have any despicable fiends left to be brought down?” I asked.

“You know, I find you somewhat despicable.” She tilted her head in an innocent manner as if to call me out for not realizing at once that I was the fiend she’d been talking about. I was shocked by this unexpected declaration of war, but I’d barely begun to process the idea when Yumiella abruptly redirected the conversation, pulling at the collar of her dress and declaring, “Hey, I want to take a bath.”

“Oh, uh, sure... I’ll have one drawn for you.”

Was this the audaciousness of a hidden boss? Perhaps my life would’ve been easier if I had learned earlier in my life to be as impudent as she was.

Maybe she was just that excited for a bath, but 2 began humming a tune, seemingly pleased. It was as if I wasn't even there. I left the guest room feeling slightly unsatisfied.

Patrick was waiting for me outside the room, leaning against the wall. He had probably followed me out of shared concern for 2. We walked down the hall together.

"Did you hear our conversation?"

"Only part of it."

"It looks like it was just a misunderstanding. I don't think she has any intention of taking herself out of the picture like that." I glanced to my side and saw that Patrick seemed happy about this, despite his efforts to try and maintain a neutral expression. I wasn't sure if he was genuinely happy that 2 wasn't in immediate danger, but I had to admit that I didn't feel bad about this new information either.

Just then, after a silence so protracted that I had almost forgotten he was there, a certain wet blanket spoke up from my shadow. "That's too bad. Things would be easier if the miss from the parallel world just died on her own without us having to do anything."

I rolled my eyes. "You're such a bad god, Lemn..."

"Why? She's a dangerous person who destroyed an entire world. It's only natural for me to want her to disappear, for the sake of this world's safety."

The god of darkness seemed to care about the collective good just a little too much for my tastes. While I could see where he was coming from, given his position as a god who oversaw the world, he understood far too little about human emotions.

"Is Yumiella 2 really dangerous?" I asked him.

"Of course she is."

"What if she were to live the rest of her life without harming anyone ever again?"

“That wouldn’t change the fact that she’s a dangerous being. She has the power to destroy an entire world on her own. I wouldn’t even joke about letting someone like that live.”

Not only did Lemn consistently fail at understanding human emotion, he didn’t seem to be used to interacting with humans at all.

“A dangerous being that has the power to destroy a world is a description that applies to this Yumiella as well,” Patrick said, pointing out the flaw in Lemn’s logic.

“Oh...” Lemn digested that for a moment. “But you’re on my side, right, miss? You wouldn’t like it if the world was gone, right?”

I was finally starting to understand how Lemn’s mind worked. He prioritized the collective above all else in order to protect the world. He didn’t care how many individuals he had to sacrifice, as long as it was for the collective benefit of the whole. He was probably only being friendly with me right now because of the more pressing threat of Yumiella 2. The way he refused to call anyone by their given names was likely a manifestation of how little he prioritized individual people.

“I don’t think about grandiose things like ‘protecting the world.’ It’s not exactly top of mind for someone like me.”

“I thought you were willing to fight her, miss.”

“If 2 tries to hurt me or those around me, then sure, I’ll fight her. I only protect what’s within my power.” Even if I was strong enough to destroy a world, it wasn’t within my power to make everyone in the world happy. That’s why I’d decided to look at things practically and protect what I could.

“Well,” Lemn said begrudgingly, “I guess our interests are aligned for now.”

“Also, if it’s possible, I want to save 2 as well.”

“You should give up on that. It won’t be possible. Even if your reach extends farther than your average human’s, it doesn’t stretch *that* far.”

I wanted to ask Lemn how I ought to proceed with her from now on, but it was clear that he wasn’t going to offer me any useful guidance.

Still, what Lemn was saying was true. It was reckless to try and save my other self, someone who had destroyed an entire world.

What do I do here? If I or those close to me end up getting sacrificed to save her, that would just be getting my priorities backwards...

Over the course of our conversation with the god in my shadow, we had arrived at my room. Only then did it occur to me to ask the obvious question.

“Oh, Lemn, why haven’t you said anything until now?” I asked. “Is there a reason you’re hiding from 2?” Crickets. “Uh... Lemn?”

There was no response from my shadow. It seemed like he’d once again disappeared. Thinking back to how he’d described it, Lemn could enter and exit any shadow, but I wasn’t sure about the specifics beyond that.

At a loss for how to respond, I turned to Patrick, who was glaring down at my feet.

“What’s with that terrifying expression?” I asked him. “Maybe he left because you scared him off.”

“Oh, sorry. It’s just that I find that god of darkness to be such a deplorable guy. I can’t tell if he’s on our side or not.”

“The same could be said for 2.”

I was sure we wouldn’t be feeling so stressed out if it were easier to tell who was an ally and who was an enemy. I honestly didn’t want either of them to be our enemy, but things weren’t that simple.

I wonder if I’ll really be forced to have an actual fight with Yumiella 2. I don’t want to, and anyway, it would be pointless since I’m clearly stronger than her.

I sighed. “I think I want to be alone for a bit and think.”

“Okay,” Patrick said with a small smile. “Call for me as soon as you get tired of being alone.”



I left Patrick and returned to my room alone. My mind was teeming with thoughts about my other self.

She was especially hostile towards me, but I just couldn't bring myself to resent her. I didn't like that she had the same face as me, and I was offended at how she had bad-mouthed me, but that was different from a true hatred from deep within one's heart.

When I'd noticed how her hair had gotten so long that it covered one eye because she didn't have anyone to cut it, my heart had ached for her. On top of that, her frilly gothic-lolita-style dress was... Well, that was probably just a difference in taste.

Okay, no, upon further reflection, I thought her choice in clothing was unbelievable. I was suspicious of her sanity if she could wear something so whimsical without batting an eye. Her choice to wear that dress was so crazy that it was honestly easier to understand why she had destroyed her world.

But in a weird way, I was perhaps grateful for her clothes, since they were an easy way to tell us apart. If we had the same haircut and similar clothing, would anyone be able to tell us apart? I bet that if we also tried to talk in a similar manner, then it would become nearly impossible to say which of us was which.

Oh no, I've come up with a more intense version of a twin-swapping prank, and it would definitely be super fun. Now I really wanna do it.

"All right, let's do it," I said to myself with a determined nod. Coincidentally, I was alone right now. Obviously, the reason I'd felt the need to ask Patrick to give me space was because I needed to pull this prank, not because I wanted to think. That had definitely been my intention all along.

I ran out of my room and hurried down the stairs, being careful to make sure no one heard me, of course—it had become a habit to walk around silently. My destination was the mansion's bathroom, where 2 was likely in the process of bathing.

You must have really let your guard down in order to feel comfortable taking off your clothes in enemy territory!

I slowly entered the changing area of the bathroom. Just beyond the inner door was the bathing area. I could hear the sounds of bathwater splashing on the other side.

All right, where did she put her dress? I thought to myself, prepared to let the pranking begin.

Just then, a sharp voice yelled out, “Hey! Who’s there?” 2’s ability to sense people was incredible. Everything was under control, though, because I’d come up with a plan for this exact contingency.

“I’ve brought you a change of clothes,” I said, pitching my voice a little higher.

“You should really communicate with the other servants.” 2’s voice through the door dripped with disdain. “Like I said earlier, I’m not planning on wearing anything other than those same clothes.”

“I apologize, madam. I’ll excuse myself.”

Huh? You’re going to wear those clothes to sleep in too? That’s a little insane. You should wear something more normal to bed at the very least.

I needed to flee the scene in order to not arouse any suspicion, but I’d located her clothes quickly enough. I gently picked them up and left the changing area. Of course, I left a different outfit for her—my normal pajamas that I always wore to bed.

After obtaining 2’s gothic lolita dress, I quickly returned to my room to change—when that was done I’d head in Patrick’s direction.

Will he notice? I wondered giddily. *Man, these kinds of pranks are the best.*

Unfortunately, it took a while to get into clothes that I wasn’t used to putting on. There were buttons in weird places, and it didn’t seem like an outfit that someone could don without additional help.

I only have until 2 finishes her bath, I reminded myself. *I have to move quickly.*

I moved sneakily down the halls, irritated by the rustle of frills that I wasn’t used to, when I ran into Eleanora.

Even though 2 had been nothing but cold to Eleanora, that sweet girl still gave me a smile.

“Oh!” She looked at me uncertainly. “Um, is it okay to just call you Yumiella?”

“Call me whatever you want,” I said in what I hoped was a haughty tone. “I

guess you can call me 2 like that other one does if it's too confusing for you."

"That isn't a very cute name," Eleanora said with a charming little pout. "Yumiella's always so careless about these sorts of things... Oh, when I said Yumiella I meant the usual Yumiella—"

"I get it! Stop saying 'Yumiella' so much."

Whoa, Eleanora actually thinks I'm 2! These clothes are really effective. It's probably because of my acting skills too. Since we're the same person, we sound exactly the same if I just copy her manner of speech. I guess the only thing I can't replicate is her hairstyle.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, Eleanora noticed that very thing.

"Oh? Your long hair has been..."

"I cut it off because it was getting annoying," I scrambled to improvise. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Are you perhaps...Yumiella?"

"Excuse me? I've told you plenty of times already, my name *is* Yumiella."

Uh-oh, I guess my hair raised suspicion.

Eleanora tilted her head as she looked at me suspiciously.

"Hm...? Huh...?"

"What?" I cut off her curious noises rudely. "If you don't have anything intelligent to say, then I'm going to leave."

"Oh, yes, good night...?"

I ended our conversation abruptly, since it seemed like she was onto me, and sailed past her. She didn't for sure know it was me, but she clearly thought that it seemed like there was something off. Eleanora was sometimes strangely perceptive.

I quickly left Eleanora behind and headed to Patrick's room. Patrick didn't have anything approaching Eleanora's natural intuition, so he probably wouldn't be able to tell it was me. I braced myself before knocking on the door

to his room.

“Come in. Who is it?”

“It’s me.”

“Yumiella?”

“Excuse me? Why is that even a question? Do you not know the sound of your own girlfriend’s voice?” I grumbled as I opened the door.

Saying something nasty right away, right on. I definitely got a full ten points on how 2-like that dialogue sounded. I should easily be able to trick Patrick like this.

Patrick turned his head to glance at me as I entered, then returned his attention to his desk, where he was writing something. This wasn’t the reaction I had hoped for. I had expected that he would freeze up if 2 entered his room.

“How are you feeling? You seemed unusually stressed earlier,” he began, his back still turned to me. “Also, what’s with those clothes?”

“I’ve always been wearing these clothes...” I hazarded. Then, feigning outrage: “What, did you mistake me for *her*? My hair’s different because I cut it; it was getting in my way.”

“I mean, you’re Yumiella, aren’t you?”

I wasn’t getting anywhere. He was way too casual with 2—or rather, me dressed as 2—standing before him. Patrick wasn’t acting as I had expected.

But I can’t let him see my concern. Right now, I’m Yumiella 2. I can’t show any outward signs of my feelings for him.

I tried again. “Yumiella is indeed my name. I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

“I should’ve phrased it more clearly. Well...” Patrick spun around in his chair and looked me right in the eye. “I don’t really like calling you ‘1’... How about this? You’re my Yumiella, right?”

“*Your* Yumiella? Referring to someone in such a possessive way is, um...”

“You’re mine and mine alone, though, aren’t you? In a romantic sense?”

“Yes...” I admitted after a short pause.

I mean, I don't belong to Patrick, but...I guess that's technically true, I'm Patrick's Yumiella, committed to him alone. I see now; he knew it was me from the start. That's why his responses weren't making sense.

“How did you know?” I asked. “I thought I was exactly like 2, aside from the hairstyle.”

“Well... I guess it's like you have a distinctive air about you, or the way I sense your presence... There's something about you where I can always just tell it's you.”

“What does that even mean?”

Does that mean there's no logical reason for him to know? He can just sort of tell that I'm me, based on his own intuition and senses? I mean...doesn't that mean he's, like, way too in love with me?

Patrick looked me up and down and observed, “You look really good in that kind of dress, by the way.”

“Oh, this is, um, it's just so I can disguise myself as 2. I'm never wearing it again.”

The moment I realized he was looking at me as *me*, I was filled with embarrassment. I was currently standing before Patrick in a gothic lolita dress I had said I would never wear. My fun prank had turned into a shameful display.

“I'm surprised,” Patrick said as I contemplated my escape options.

“It's not like that! I didn't secretly want to wear this or anything!”

“Not that, I'm surprised that she lent you those clothes.”

“Oh, I might be in trouble if I don't get them back to her soon,” I admitted.

I wanted to believe Yumiella 2 was someone who liked long baths.

I take really short baths though. I mean, I don't think they're short, but sometimes Rita doesn't even believe that I took a bath at all. I always have to be careful about it, or else she'll try to insist on going in with me and washing my body. That's why I recently started counting to two hundred when I'm in there

instead of just one hundred like I used to... As my mind wandered, a loud noise rang out from downstairs. *Oh no, I'm too late.*

It wouldn't be good for 2 to cause a commotion at the other end of the house, so I popped my head out into the hallway and called out, "I'm here! On the second floor!" I could hear the loud stomps that announced that she was barging up the stairs. Yumiella 2 appeared with remarkable speed, with only a towel wrapped around her. "Why are you running around dressed in just that?!" I demanded, scandalized.

"I knew it, it *was* you!" Her eyes blazed accusingly. "I can't believe you!"

What I can't believe is how you're dressed. Patrick can see you!

The half naked girl forced her way into the room.

Oh, I see she is at least wearing the triangle nightcap. I guess she didn't like the polka-dot pajamas.

"I'm sorry," I exclaimed. "I'm so sorry!"

"Give me my clothes back if you're so sorry! Come on, take them off!" 2 grabbed on to me, still only wrapped in a towel, trying to tear her dress off me.

At this rate there are going to be two Yumiellas that are basically naked. Who benefits from this...? I guess Patrick might. I mean, he's a guy after all. It's only natural for him to want to see the naked body of the beautiful girl he loves. Maybe it's okay if I let this happen? I'm going to let him see me naked one day anyway. If I just think of this as a future event happening early... Well, it's probably something not that far in the future. It's at least going to happen before the future in which all humans wear jet-packs and have flying cars.

"All right, chill out, I'll take it off."

"You're lying! You're just going to run, aren't you?! You can't fool me!" Yumiella 2, with her strange attachment to this gothic lolita dress, whipped her wet hair around as she pulled insistently at the fabric. The towel wrapped around her threatened to fall off at any moment.

Wait... Isn't 2 more arousing in this situation than I am? After having this scene burned into his memory, Patrick's going to end up lusting after 2... This is

bad, this is really bad.

My imagination had conjured the worst possible ending for my future, and so I decided that I needed to find a way to cancel this R-rated occurrence. I grabbed 2's hands and pulled them down against her sides as I tried to think of a way to stop her from tearing the clothes off my back.

Come on, isn't she embarrassed by this? She's in front of a guy wearing only a towel. Maybe she's so upset about the dress that she hasn't even noticed that Patrick is here? Way to be hotheaded.

"Haven't you noticed?" I asked. "Patrick is right there."

She snorted. "He left as soon as I came in."

"Huh...?" I looked around the room, but she was right: Patrick was nowhere to be found. He had apparently made his exit quite quickly. Perhaps I was the hotheaded one here. I stood there blankly.

"So come on, take the dress off already," she insisted.

"I'll take it off," I grumbled. "Calm down."

Yumiella 2 forcefully undressed me, removing her dress from my body.

I would've taken it off myself, you know.

In the blink of an eye, she had returned herself to all her gothic lolita glory.

So, what am I supposed to wear?

"Hey, what am I going to wear?" I demanded.

"Why should I care?"

I was facing yet another crisis—there was nothing in the immediate vicinity for me to put on. I'd thought we could just swap clothes, but she had come up here with only a single towel wrapped around her.

Fine, I guess I'll have to ask 2 to get my clothes for me.

When I verbalized my perfectly reasonable request, 2 responded with a snicker. She opened the door as she said, "Well, the rest is up to you."

"Huh? Wait, what about my—" I was cut off by the door slamming shut.

Damn you! She walked off knowing full well what she was doing! Is this revenge for me borrowing her dress? I guess she was pretty upset. But what the heck do I do in this situation? This is Patrick's room, so I don't think there's anything I could... Just then, I caught sight of a dress shirt sloppily draped over the back of his chair.

It was surprising for someone as organized as Patrick to have his clothes strewn about like this, but considering the circumstances, it was a lucky surprise for me. I figured it would be good enough for now, and I pulled his shirt over my head. It was pretty big on me, but it worked out perfectly because it was long enough to cover my lower body as well. It basically fit me like a dress.

All right, I've got some clothes, and I accomplished what I set out to do. It's time for bed. Although I guess I should say something to Patrick first.

I exited his room and roamed the hallways in search of him. I figured I would pass by someone sooner or later, and I could ask them if they'd seen him.

As I walked down a hallway on the second floor, I saw Patrick walking in the opposite direction towards me.

Perfect!

"There you are, Patrick. Sorry for causing a ruckus in your room. It's pretty much 2's fault."

"Yumiella?! What's with that...?"

I looked down at myself, uncertain as to what might have prompted such a strong reaction on his part.

Oh, right, I'm wearing nothing but Patrick's shirt right now. I should let him know that I'm borrowing his clothes.

"Oh, yeah, I'm going to borrow this for a bit. Yumiella 2 took my— Well, okay, her clothes that I was wearing."

"O-Oh, I see..." Patrick said, his eyes swimming.

I should also thank him for stepping out when 2 ran in.

"Thanks for surrendering your room to us earlier. Even if she's not me, it was kind of embarrassing with her dressed like that."

“Y-Yeah, she might feel embarrassed about it later on too...”

He also did it out of consideration towards her, given that she was dressed only in a towel? Patrick's such a saint. If I ran into him half naked, I would totally come up with a bunch of excuses to keep sneaking glances. But even if he's being a gentleman right now, it would also be so cute if he was actually trying to suppress an overwhelming desire to hug her... But that would never happen, though; that's completely out of the question.

“I guess you're free to imagine whatever you want,” I mumbled, only a little distracted.



“Hurry up and put on some clothes, Yumiella,” he scolded. “It would be bad if someone saw you.”

“Huh? I am wearing clothes, though. I guess underneath I’m only wearing underwear, but it’s hardly any different from wearing a day dress.”

“How is that even remotely the same?! You shouldn’t walk around dressed like that!”

Now Patrick was acting really strange, and I noticed that he kept avoiding making eye contact with me.

What’s going on here? He’s bringing up how I’m dressed, but I’m properly clothed in his shirt. I get embarrassed, unlike 2, so I wouldn’t be out in public in any kind of suggestive outfit. What’s going on? Does he not like other people borrowing his clothes? If that’s the case, I feel bad.

“Oh, I’m sorry for taking your shirt without asking. I’ll give it back to you right away.”

“No, don’t take it off! Don’t!” He sounded desperate.

“I’m not taking it off here!”

Why is he saying something so ridiculous out of nowhere?! I’m not the kind of person who just takes off their clothes in front of others, and I certainly would never make someone get naked in front of me! He should know that by now, considering how long we’ve known each other!

“Just please go back to your room and get changed, and *hurry*.”

“What? Okay...” Still confused, I found myself marched back to my room and shoved through the door.

I had no idea what had caused Patrick such apparent distress, but one thing I did gather from this incident was that I might not be capable of making Patrick’s heart race after all.

Interlude 4: Patrick

Patrick shoved Yumiella into her room, closed the door, and then let out a sigh of relief.

“Why was Yumiella walking around dressed like that...?” he mumbled to himself.

He could finally admit to himself that Yumiella, now safely hidden behind a door, was wearing quite the suggestive outfit. He had a fairly good picture of how she’d ended up in that situation. After being forced to return the black gothic lolita dress, she’d probably had nothing else to wear.

What he didn’t understand was how she could be so blasé about wandering around in nothing but an oversized dress shirt. Patrick was well aware that she lacked common sense, had no real understanding of social mores, and didn’t have a normal thought process, but despite all of that, she still had *some* feminine qualities befitting a girl of her age.

When it came to matters related to romantic relationships, she would often become lovably bashful and, compared to her general brash attitude, unusually embarrassed. Patrick generally found that side of Yumiella to be incredibly adorable, but...

“Oh, I guess that didn’t register as an embarrassing outfit for her...” After taking several deep breaths and calming himself down, he tried to follow Yumiella’s thought process.

It was just a guess, but he believed that Yumiella equated wearing nothing but a dress shirt to wearing an actual dress. It was true that the amount of skin exposed wasn’t very different, but... Patrick stopped that line of thought right in its tracks and shook his head in a panic, trying to banish the image of Yumiella in his dress shirt that popped up unbidden in his mind.

Patrick walked fast, heading towards the door out to the grounds. It was

nearing winter, and the nights were getting chilly—it would be the perfect temperature to cool down his uncomfortably warm face.

He was standing in the yard, looking up at the starry night sky, when he heard a noise behind him. He flinched and turned around to find a black-haired girl behind him. Her face was one he was used to seeing, except that one eye was obscured by her hair. On top of that, the girl was wearing a gown that his Yumiella would never wear (under normal circumstances, anyway).

She was the Yumiella Dolkness from a parallel world. This world-destroying girl settled her lips into a mocking smile.

“Are you really okay being out here right now all alone?” she asked with a laugh. “Your dear girlfriend is waiting for you in her room.”

“Yumiella’s gone back to her room by herself. Also, she got something to wear on her own. She doesn’t need my help.”

“That’s strange. She didn’t have any clothes in your room... I made sure of it when I abandoned her there.”

After a moment of awkward silence, Patrick admitted, “There was a shirt of mine there...” He had debated whether or not he should mention this, but he decided that it would be better to have a frank conversation about the situation so that he had a chance to forbid this Yumiella from playing such annoying pranks in the future.

Instead of having a civil conversation, though, she became visibly upset and launched into a tirade of insults against her other self. “What?! I can’t believe it... Flirting with a guy and seducing him like that... I just hate her more and more.”

“I don’t think Yumiella had any intention of doing those things...” Patrick couldn’t connect the concept of “flirting” with his Yumiella at all. “Seducing” was a word that was even more difficult to put in the same sentence as her name.

I mean, maybe I just didn’t notice, and she was trying to seduce me, Patrick mused. There was one time she held up her hair and said, “Look, Patrick, it’s the nape of my neck. Come on, look,” before closing in on me with her back facing

me, so maybe that was...?

“No, it definitely wasn’t,” he assured himself with a decisive nod.

“Who are you talking to?” she grumbled, sucking her teeth. She walked up beside Patrick and joined him in looking up at the night sky. “You really like her, huh...?” she observed quietly.

“Yeah, I fell for her hard.”

“She was probably alone in the Academy too. She probably didn’t have any friends, or anyone on her side at first. You approached her because...you felt sorry for her?”

“You think I felt sorry for *Yumiella*?” For a moment, Patrick was genuinely confused by Yumiella 2’s words.

He had to admit to himself that he might have felt a *little* sorry for her in the beginning, but the more time he’d spent with her, the more those feelings had disappeared.

Seeing his reaction, the other Yumiella seemed to understand.

“So you really did just naturally fall for her... You have terrible taste in women.”

“I won’t deny that.”

“You know, she seems pretty dense. I’m sure there are people who might try to use that to their benefit and take advantage of her.”

“It’s true that she’s a bit dense, but no one’s trying to do that...”

“Really? Weren’t you just ogling her, not ten minutes ago? It’s not hard to remove a men’s dress shirt.”

“I was thinking no such thing!” Patrick exclaimed without hesitation. Hearing those words from someone who looked identical to his fiancée packed an extra punch. He took a deep breath, apologized for raising his voice, and then tried to change the topic, but he found himself unsure of what to call her.

“Yumi— I mean, um, you...” he stammered.

“You can just call me 2 like she does.”

“Well, that’s kind of...” Patrick wasn’t comfortable with calling her “Yumiella 2.” It was a distinction made solely for practical purposes, but he didn’t like using numbers for people.

The girl beside him sighed. “Then plain Yumiella is fine, since the other one’s not here anyway.”

He winced. “That’s also kind of...”

“Fine, I get it. She’s the only ‘Yumiella’ for you, or something mushy like that, right? Sure, why not? I hope you two have a long, happy relationship.” She spat out her words so bitterly that they lacked any sense of the blessing they might have otherwise conveyed.

Patrick observed her once more. Her black hair was still slightly wet from her bath, and it appeared exactly the same as Yumiella’s, no matter how many times he looked at it. He wondered how they could be so different while also being *this* similar.

After spending a little time with this other Yumiella, Patrick was starting to feel that deep down, she wasn’t a bad person. Sure, she hurled insults, and she seemed to be constantly unhappy, but there was nothing outwardly malicious about her; she didn’t seem like someone who would kill for fun.

All it had taken were some very small factors in their lives that had been different; maybe if this Yumiella had been given some of the chances that his had, it could’ve sent her down a different path. If the people around her had just been kinder, then maybe... Patrick realized with a start that he would’ve been one of those people around her.

“Right, there was a me in your world too. My other self, he... I’m sorry. It’s useless for me to feel bad for how he treated you.”

“There’s no point in you getting depressed about it. In the same way that I’m a different person from her, the you back there was different from the you here.”

“The other me was a heartless bastard.”

I want to go to the parallel world and punch my other self, Patrick thought, finally understanding the jealousy that had caused things between the two

Yumiellas to get so dicey so quickly.

Feeling bad for her made Patrick wonder about this other Yumiella's future. She couldn't go back to her former world, but it didn't seem right for her to live in this world either. This world's Yumiella was probably in agony right now, worrying about the same thing. Despite her claims that she didn't like her, Patrick could tell that his Yumiella genuinely cared for this one.

Unable to find the right words, Patrick's mind filled itself with anxious thoughts as time silently passed. The other Yumiella was the one to finally break the silence.

"Hey! Don't just suddenly stop talking like that!" she snapped, glaring at him. "If you want to punish yourself, do it on your own time!" Just as he had thought, she had a kind heart. Patrick wanted to tell her that he was more worried about her than mad at himself, but she looked away from him and back up at the sky as she continued. "The other you reached out to me. I'm the one who dismissed him. Thank you for that... Although I guess thanking this version of you doesn't accomplish anything."

Patrick turned to her, shocked by her words, but she was already heading back inside.

"What do I do...?" he wondered aloud. Patrick had already felt like he wanted to save the other Yumiella if he could. Those feelings had grown, to the point that now he was determined to save her, no matter what it took. "My Yumiella probably won't like that..." Patrick imagined that if she heard him say that, Yumiella would likely act upset, but it would only be for form's sake. She, too, would do everything she could to save her other self.

Imagining that happening, Patrick couldn't help but laugh.

Chapter 5: The Hidden Boss Settles Things with the Hidden Boss

The morning after Yumiella 2 had appeared, she was sitting at our table having breakfast, as if nothing at all was out of the ordinary. She looked way too much like she belonged here. If she had just used this ability to blend in as she was doing now in her old life in her own world, maybe she wouldn't have felt so much like she'd been pushed up against a wall, to the point of destroying her entire world.

"Are you free after this?" 2 casually asked, as if she were inviting me to go shopping.

"I am..." I eyed her suspiciously. "Why? What do you want?"

"Just a little chat."

What is it she wants to talk about, I wonder? I don't know what her plans are moving forward, so it's kind of helpful that she's suggesting we talk. But considering how she's acting, it doesn't seem like it's that important of a conversation.

"Where do you want to talk?" I asked. "Should Patrick be there too?"

"Let's see... Somewhere spacious would probably be best. And yes, the margrave's kid should probably be there too."

Somewhere spacious? Does that mean the topic could lead to a fistfight? That doesn't really narrow it down. No matter what we talk about, I feel like one of us will eventually end up throwing a punch. I guess the yard out back should be fine.

Immediately after finishing breakfast, and after shoving Eleanora (who wanted to join us) back inside, we headed out into the yard. Ryu seemed to still be off on his morning walk and so was nowhere to be found, though it was likely he'd be returning shortly.

Our yard was quite spacious, appointed with a table and chairs, which were rarely used. These were perfectly normal pieces of outdoor furniture, like the kind you would see as sidewalk seating at a café.

“Do you want to sit and talk?” I asked.

“No thanks. We’ll probably end up standing right away.”

Oh? Is it a fight? Do you want to fight?

We stood facing each other, keeping a certain amount of distance between us, with Patrick at my side. Coincidentally, this was how we had been positioned when we’d first met.

All right then, what do you want to talk about, 2? Depending on the topic, it might lead to an immediate off-site brawl.

“You know the reason I came to this world, right?” she began.

“Well, yeah.”

“I’ll say it again, but I came to this world for you.”

“Yeah.”

“I thought I should take care of what I came here to do.”

I gulped. Her objective was to kill me and unlock her level cap.

I see... I knew it somewhere in my heart, but it looks like I really won’t be able to avoid fighting 2.

“I thought we’d have more time,” I said, a little sadly.

“What’s the point in taking our time and being friendly?”

“I guess you’re right...”

Even though I agreed with her, it still hurt to fight her. We’d argued and fought each other numerous times, and she had even left me without anything to wear... Wait. Remembering that, I could totally fight her. If anything, I was more motivated than ever.

Considering the damage we’re bound to do to our surroundings, my yard isn’t the best place for this, but eh, it’s fine.

“Let’s begin,” I said.

“Yes, let’s...”

The first to hit would win. I couldn’t afford to pay attention to what 2 was saying. I kicked off the ground and sped forward, closing in on 2.

“...take down that despicable god of evil.”

“Huh?”

By the time 2 finished her thought, my fist had already plunged into her face. Caught off guard, 2 was hit full-force by my Yumiella Punch, or rather, my Yumiella 1 Punch... *No*, I reminded myself, *Rider 1’s kick was called “Rider Kick,” so “Yumiella Punch” is fine...* Either way, 2 didn’t brace herself and took the full brunt of my Yumiella Punch, which sent her flying backwards. She had maybe said something important, but that was neither here nor there.

Right as I was about to follow up my attack, Patrick stopped me.

“Hey! Stop, Yumiella!”

“Don’t stop me, Patrick! We’re destined to fight!” I exclaimed dramatically. “There’s no other option for us!”

“No, not that. She was saying something that sounded important.”

“Darn... She actually was?”

Had I started this battle based on a misunderstanding? I mean, 2 was the one who said she wanted to take care of what she’d come here to do... This is a mystery.

The only person who could solve this mystery was currently stumbling to her feet.

“Maybe I should just kill you first...” 2 grumbled.

“Oh, if you weren’t actually intending to kill me, then we don’t have any reason to fight, do we?”

“Why are *you* saying that after throwing the first punch?!” Yumiella 2 cried, lifting her hands with her palms towards me. In an instant, dense, dark magical energy began flowing from her. *Oh, it’s coming*, I thought to myself. “*Black*

Hole.”

Most of my body was enveloped in the jet-black orb. In a second, my body would disappear along with the black orb...probably? I'd never been hit with the spell myself, of course, so I thought that's what would've happened if I hadn't moved.

Black Hole was a spell that worked in two steps—first, you had to make the orb appear on or around your target, and then the orb would disappear, taking all of the matter within its sphere along with it. It all happened in a flash, but from the beginning of the attack to the end, there was a barely discernible time lag. This was all to say that it was no sweat for me to dodge it.

“Whoa, that's dangerous.” I leaped into the air, twisting my body to escape from *Black Hole*'s area of effect.

That surprised me. I can easily dodge it, but a spell that would instakill me like that isn't good for my heart.

“What...?” Yumiella 2 seemed genuinely shocked. “How are you alive?”

“Huh? I mean, I just dodged it.”

“It's not a spell that you can just dodge, is it? You—” She was interrupted by Patrick's blade at her throat. He'd run up behind her while we were talking.

“Don't move,” he ordered. “I'll slice you wide open if I sense any magical energy.”

“What? Patrick?” I was puzzled. “Why are you suddenly in a murderous rage? Just a second ago you were trying to stop me.”

“Because just now, she was definitely trying to kill you.”

Trying to kill me? That's a bit of an exaggeration. Even Patrick could've dodged that attack.

“Don't make it into such a big deal,” I said. “You could've dodged that too, couldn't you?”

“Not *Black Hole*,” Patrick insisted. “You can't predict how wide of an area it'll cover, so there's no way to dodge it.”

“You just move after seeing it,” I explained.

“That’s *actually* impossible...”

Wait, really? In that case, did Yumiella 2 actually try to kill me? No way. Even if that attack had hit me, I wouldn’t have died.

“My head wasn’t in its range. As long as my head is safe, I think I can heal myself with recovery magic,” I said, perhaps a little too casually. After a moment’s thought, I amended, “Not that I’ve ever tried it.”

“Can you even use magic if you’re just a head...?” he asked.

“I can’t really say since I haven’t tried experimenting...” I brightened. “Oh, but I’ve been wearing my amulet of protection, so I should have just barely survived either way.”

Why was I trying to defend Yumiella 2? It was meaningless to debate whether she had intended to kill me or not with prosecutor Patrick on the case. The defendant, Yumiella 2, finally spoke up.

“I meant to kill you with that spell,” she confessed, rendering moot my efforts to defend her.

Really? I wouldn’t have died that easily. Is 2 just at that age where she wants to posture like she’s bad and tough?

For some reason, the tension between 2 and Patrick seemed to be extremely volatile, so I decided to step up and mediate. It was rare for me to find myself in this position. I grabbed the blade of Patrick’s sword, since it was the easiest part to hold on to, trying to get him to lower it.

“Come on, let’s put this down. It’s not like you can cut her with something like this anyway.”

“Hey, don’t hold it there! That’s... Oh, I see. It won’t cut.” Patrick looked at his sword sadly and mumbled something about how he’d thought it was good quality.

When it comes to damaging a Yumiella, there isn’t much difference between a sword and a wooden club, but if you don’t mind its dull blade, then this is a fine sword. Cheer up, Patrick!

Given the poor quality of the sword, though, it was also strange that Yumiella 2 had sincerely obeyed Patrick's command not to move.

"Why didn't you move?" I asked her curiously.

"I stayed frozen because I really thought he would stab me if I didn't," 2 answered.

"Like I said, you wouldn't easily be cut by a sword like this."

"That only applies to you," she explained. I felt betrayed and disillusioned; I had assumed that 2 had the same Yumiella-level defense as me.

I see, so this was in reality a tense scene where people were legitimately trying to kill each other. I can't believe I didn't notice. I guess I am the one who started this fight, though, so I should be the bigger person and apologize and ask Yumiella 2 for details about what she was trying to talk about before I punched her in the face.

"Uh, sorry for the misunderstanding," I said sheepishly. "So, you were saying something...?"

"Yes. Where should I begin..." She looked askance at me and Patrick. "Seeing how you two have reacted, it seems as if there's a basic misunderstanding about my objective here."

"Aren't you going to take me down and unlock your level cap?" I asked.

"I thought about doing that just now, but that would just be a means to an end and not my actual goal."

"What do you mean by that? Didn't you say in the beginning that you came here for me?"

"Yes. I came here to see you."

"Oh, that's what you meant."

Thinking back on it now, Yumiella 2 *had* said she'd come to this world for me, but she had never said anything about defeating me.

Then why did she come all the way to another world just to see me? It can't be something as stupid as just wanting to see a parallel-world version of

herself...could it?

At long last, Yumiella 2 shared her true objective.

“As I was trying to explain before being attacked...I came to this world to find a way to take down that despicable god of evil. I don’t think I’m any match for him at my current strength. I wasn’t sure if I should take you down and get stronger or ask you for your help, but seeing as you managed to avoid getting hit by *Black Hole*, I don’t think I could win against you.”

Things are getting weird again. What the hell kind of being is the god of evil? Not only that, but...

“Why didn’t you say something so important sooner?!” I exclaimed indignantly.

Yumiella 2 shrugged. “I thought you knew.”

“How would I know that?”

“Because you asked me if my objective was you. I didn’t say anything because I thought you understood what was going on.”

You’re kidding me... Yumiella 2, you are insanely bad at communicating. Of course people would misunderstand you. I get it now, though: she wants more firepower to take down the god of evil. Wait, god of evil? I can think of a certain despicable god.

I called down towards the shadow at my feet, the place from which that certain despicable god was surely watching us right now.

“Lemn, are you there?”

There was a short silence, and then with a long-suffering sigh, Lemn appeared from my shadow. “I’m not the god of evil she’s talking about...”

Though he’d just denied it, I thought it would be best to ask 2 as well. “This kid isn’t the god of evil, right?”

Yumiella 2 shook her head. “Not him. He’s the god that was trying to resist me.”

“Lemn is pretty despicable too...or rather, he’s shady,” I amended.

“The god of evil is much more despicable and even shadier,” 2 assured me.

Wow, even more so than Lemn? This god of evil must be a pretty terrible guy. I really don’t want to meet him. Now that I think about it, she defeated the Lemn in her world, so there’s no way he could be the god of evil that she isn’t strong enough to defeat. Sorry for suspecting you, Lemn.

Although Lemn had finally materialized from the shadows, he hid behind me at once, seeming to be overly cautious of Yumiella 2.

“Wait, if Lemn is the god who resisted you...does that mean there was a second god? One who didn’t resist you?”

“Yes. I don’t know her name. She said she’d come to stop me, but she didn’t show any signs of wanting to fight. Some white-haired goddess.”

“White-haired...? Did she shoot beams from her forehead?”

“What? What in the world are you talking about?” 2 seemed genuinely confused.

Wait, she’s not talking about Sanon? I mean, after the way she resisted me, I guess I can’t imagine her not resisting, and it’s also strange that she didn’t shoot any beams from her forehead. Oh well, I guess the beams wouldn’t come out if she wasn’t doing any actual resisting. But still. Yumiella 2 must be talking about a completely different god.

The idea of another new god appearing in addition to the god of evil made me feel weary to my bones, but then Lemn spoke up.

“The god that didn’t resist her is Sanon,” he confirmed.

“Oh, she was the god that the Sanonists worship? She should’ve at least introduced herself or something,” 2 complained.

“She shoots light-type beams from her forehead,” I explained. “Even I would be in danger if I got hit with one of those.”

“It would hurt *you*?!” 2 exclaimed.

Curious as to why Sanon hadn’t put up any kind of fight, I turned to Lemn. I

figured since his other self had tried to ally with Sanon in the parallel world, he'd know the answer to my question, but I was shot down.

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "Why don't you ask Sanon herself?"

"I see..." The conversation had strayed off topic. The more important thing was the looming threat of the god of evil, not the battle between Yumiella 2 and the other gods that had already happened. "What about the god of evil? What does he look like?"

"I don't know," my counterpart admitted.

"You don't know?"

"It's kind of like he's blurry... It's like I can see him but I can't perceive him."

Does he really exist? Could he just be 2's hallucination?

Perhaps sensing my suspicious gaze, Yumiella 2 quickly went on to explain who the god of evil was.

"I first met him right after the prince defeated the Demon Lord, so it would have been around the time I decided to destroy humanity. He told me to get stronger, because I would die if I didn't."

"Did he give you strength?"

"He didn't give me anything. All he did was teach me an efficiency-based leveling method."

"What is it?!" I exclaimed, curious. "I want to know, tell me!"

What kind of level grinding method might a god pass down? Maybe it's useless knowledge for me since I'm already level 99, but I'd love to know for future reference.

"It was actually a bunch of different crazy leveling methods, like taking down a bunch of dungeon bosses by myself, for instance."

I blinked. "Isn't that normal?"

"Actually, the god of evil just told me about the leveling methods that you came up with," she said with a sigh. "The first time I heard about it, I thought whoever came up with these strategies was completely insane, and I guess I

was right.”

“I don’t appreciate being called insane by someone who decided to destroy an entire world!” I huffed, offended.

I mean, anyone could have come up with my approach to leveling. Logically thinking, instead of dungeon crawling with a group among which the EXP would be divided up, going solo and getting all the EXP to yourself is much more efficient. I’m sure anyone could’ve come up with my other methods too; there just isn’t anyone else using them for some mysterious reason.

Setting aside the perfectly reasonable nature of my leveling habits, it seemed clear from her report that this god of evil actually existed. There was no way she could have figured out my leveling methods on her own.

“Oh, is that how you were able to come here from your world?” I asked, connecting the dots. “Using the god of evil’s powers?”

“That’s right,” Yumiella 2 confirmed. “The god of evil’s ultimate goal is to cultivate someone as a strong pawn to use towards his own ends. He told me to take you down and raise my level cap.”

I see, so that’s what the god of evil is after. I recall that Lemn mentioned that there was a powerful being pulling the strings behind the scenes, so that’s probably this god of evil as well. A being above Lemn and Sanon that oversees countless parallel worlds, who isn’t bound to the shackles of the level cap at 99. Moving between worlds is probably child’s play for him.

Using the information she obtained from the god of evil, Yumiella 2 had managed to become stronger than all the other Yumiellas, and she’d used this strength to bring about the end of her world. She’d then come to this world to become even stronger. It was clear to me now: the reason she alone of all the other Yumiellas had been able to beat Alicia and the other heroes, and the reason she could travel between worlds, something even Lemn couldn’t do. It was all starting to make sense.

“But you don’t plan on defeating Yumiella, right?” Patrick asked as I sorted out the facts in my head.

“There’s no way I’m becoming one of the god of evil’s henchmen,” 2 said

decisively.

“Will the god of evil allow that...?” he wondered.

“He probably won’t. That’s why I’m here, begging you to cooperate with me.”

I stared at 2, who wasn’t begging in the slightest, as I thought about the situation.

Even if we work together and defeat the god of evil, what happens after that? Her world can’t ever return to the way it was. And I can’t see any benefits for me in all this. I have no reason to fight. I don’t mind fighting for 2’s sake, but if this is her way of getting back at the god of evil, then I have no obligation to help her.

“What would you do if I said I wouldn’t help you?” I asked.

“You can’t do that.”

“I can’t?”

“That shady god of evil is listening to us right now.” Yumiella 2 delivered this shocking information with great calmness. “He’s realized that I’ve betrayed him, so he’ll surely try to get rid of me. He’ll probably try to get rid of you too, since you’re only going to make his life difficult.”

“Why’d you get me involved?!” I seethed.

I put aside the frankly insulting fact that the god of evil considered me to be difficult and chose instead to concentrate on the fact that it appeared that I had been dragged into a situation in which I had no choice but to fight, and which was all 2’s fault.

I knew it. Yumiella 2’s a bad apple after all.

“The god of evil doesn’t even blink an eye at a world being destroyed,” Yumiella 2 pointed out. “That’s the kind of being he is. Wouldn’t you feel better if he was taken down?”

“Like I said, that doesn’t mean much coming from the person who did the actual destroying...” I grumbled.

This is bad. I’ve never gone up against someone who’s a higher level than I

am. I don't like that I don't know anything specific about his strength either. Knowing he's above level 99 isn't enough; being level 200 and level 2,000 are completely different things. I need to first analyze how powerful this opponent is.

"How strong is the god of evil?" I asked Yumiella 2. "Just an approximate guess is fine."

"How should I know? I've never seen him in battle. He seemed hesitant about using his powers too."

Wow, thanks for the completely useless information. Even if he seems reluctant to use his strength, he would probably come at us with full force to get rid of a backstabber.

I put aside the useless Miss 2 and turned my attention to Lemn.

"Do you know how strong he is?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter how strong you are," he explained. "You'd never win against him as long as you have the shackles of the level cap holding you back. There's no chance of winning if you're still at level 99. This world might come to an end too, ha ha." His dry laugh was in stark contrast to his hopeless expression. He was the god of darkness, but I'd never seen so little light in his eyes. I hadn't realized that our situation was so dire.

Still, we simply didn't have enough information about the god of evil. We weren't prepared, either location-or equipmentwise, so I suggested avoiding any immediate fighting.

"Why don't we hold off on this 'til we're better prepared? It's not because I'm scared or anything," I hurried to add. "After all, I'm stronger than you."

"No, we can't," 2 insisted. "Didn't you hear me? He's watching over us, even now." She turned to address the empty air. "You're here right now, aren't you? Come out," she snapped.

Lemn abruptly jumped into my shadow.

Oh, he fled.

Despite my prayers enjoining the god of evil to stay away, the empty space next to Yumiella 2 began to wobble and distort, just like when she had appeared in my world in the first place. Apparently this shady god had been right by us this whole time.

“I did not anticipate that you would betray me. I truly cannot understand the human thought process... In retrospect, perhaps it would have been more prudent of me to suppress your mind and turn you into my puppet. Though, I must admit that I am reluctant to use unnecessary resources...”

“Oh, were you not expecting to be betrayed?” 2 asked sweetly. “How silly of a self-proclaimed ‘higher being’ to fail to consider the possibility.”

I ignored 2 as she belligerently provoked him and observed the god of evil. I couldn’t see him. I could tell that he was there, but I couldn’t actually see him. Yumiella 2’s description of being able to see but unable to perceive him was strange yet apt.

It’s not like he’s censored... It’s kind of like static noise on a CRT TV. Not only that, but he doesn’t have a shadow. He doesn’t stand in the way of light, but he’s also not transparent. I can’t figure him out.

The god of evil’s silhouette and coloring were both ambiguous. I couldn’t tell anything about him other than the fact that he was a humanoid, roughly the size of an adult man.

Wait... Why can I tell that he’s humanoid? There’s nothing human about him, but for some reason my mind just sees him shaped as a person, despite how far he is from being human.

I was suddenly overcome with an immense fear, deeply disconcerted by the existence of a being so far out of the realm of my understanding.

“What does he look like to you, Patrick?” I asked, keeping my gaze fixed on the god of evil. “Does he look like a human-shaped wobble to you too?”

“Yeah, I see something similar. A human-shaped... Hm? Why do I think he’s shaped like a human...?”

Patrick seemed to be in a similar situation as me, and he seemed equally confused.

I wish 2 had given us some advance warning if she was going to call over such a freaky being. Even if she couldn't admit that she was going to betray the god of evil because he'd have overheard, she could've at least found a way to tell us to prepare our weapons.

"Hey! We aren't prepared for a fight, and this is my yard. Couldn't you have provided a little more warning?!"

"That's why I suggested somewhere spacious. I also asked you if you were free, didn't I?" Yumiella 2 said nonchalantly.

You didn't make it seem like it was a big deal at all! Ugh, Eleanora is right inside, and Ryu's going to come home any minute. What do I do...what do I do? Okay, first, I need to buy some time. The god of darkness is shrouded in mystery, but one thing we do know is that we can talk to him. Let's try talking this out.

I cleared my throat. "Um, hello. It's nice to meet you, Mr. God of Evil."

The wobble in the air seemed to turn its attention to me. "Are you referring to me when you say 'god of evil'?"

"Oh, maybe that's just 2's nickname for you. May I ask for your name?"

"He he, what a delightfully peculiar occurrence, a human asking me for my name. Hear and rejoice: my name is Æfæš,Æf."

Huh...? Excuse me?

The god of evil had ceremoniously announced his name, but I couldn't catch it at all. It wasn't that he was too quiet, or that he wasn't enunciating, or anything like that. It was as if the sound had clearly made it into my ear, but my brain couldn't process it.

"Could you repeat that...?"

"It's Æfæš,Æf. Oh, I do beg your pardon. Lower beings cannot comprehend it. No matter. A name means nothing to a singular being such as myself. Call me whatever you'd like."

I tried to focus in on the god of evil's voice, but I still couldn't make out his name. It was a sound unlike a vowel or a consonant, a sound that a human mouth couldn't produce. I had definitely heard it twice, yet I couldn't replay it in

my head. I couldn't even make out the tone of his voice. It was like there was static over the sound. I couldn't tell his gender either.

Is "he" even correct? I guess it's fine for now, since he speaks in a manner which reads very masculine to me for some reason. Well, he said to call him whatever I'd like, so let's come up with a good name. "God of evil" is so bland. Something easy to remember would also be better than a complicated name. Let's see...

"Then... I'll call you Spot! Now, tell me: are you a—"

"Spot?!" The squiggle squirmed with rage. "You couldn't possibly be referring to *me*, could you?! You have made the choice to call *me*, a higher being that presides over countless parallel worlds, by the name 'Spot'?!" He didn't seem too fond of "Spot."

Hey, you're the one who told me to call you whatever I wanted. I know it's a little cliché, but I thought it was a good name. I'll come up with something else, then.

"Then... What about Whiskers?"

"Whiskers?!"

"You don't like that one either? You sure do like to complain..."

At this rate, I was going to run out of names. For someone who had claimed that a name meant nothing to him, he was being pretty picky about it.

It's not even that bad of a name. I wonder if he doesn't like Spot and Whiskers because he has poor taste.

I looked to 2, who had to her credit accepted the name I bestowed upon *her* yesterday without complaining. She was covering her mouth in an attempt to contain her laughter.

"Heh heh, you're incredible," she said to me admiringly. "Whiskers, huh?" She turned to the indistinct entity. "I'm going to call you Whiskers from now on."

"How dare you! Are you mocking me, a higher being?!"

Yumiella 2's laughing a lot. Was "Whiskers" really that bad a suggestion? I wondered, turning to Patrick to see how he felt about the situation.

“Why don’t we keep calling him the god of evil like we’ve been doing?” Patrick suggested. “It’s up to him, though.”

“That is a perfectly adequate mode of address,” the nameless being agreed. “It doesn’t concern me as long as I can tell that you are referring to me.”

“That’s too boring,” I whined. “Why don’t I come up with another name—”

“You don’t have a say in this!” the god of evil snapped.

I guess “god of evil” is fine. If I can’t use names like Spot and Whiskers, I’d have to open up another folder in my mind. It’s a folder I’ve kept sealed for a long time, and for good reason: those names are hard to use.

“I guess I’ll call you the god of evil, then,” I said reluctantly. “The only other names I can come up with are ones like Schadenfreude and Kugelschreiber.”

“Oh...? Those seem more appropriate. It has recently come to my attention that I am in need of a name you beings are capable of understanding. From now on the god of evil will be known as Kugelschreiber.”

Oh, he actually likes them. He even picked the lamer of the two. Kugelschreiber is just German for “ballpoint pen.” It was also the name of my “final move” when I was in middle school and a total edgelord. He would definitely get upset knowing that his name was just a writing instrument. I’ll keep that a secret.

The god of evil, Mr. Ballpoint Pen, was looking right at me...or at least I thought he was. I couldn’t tell which direction was “forward” for him.

“So, you,” the god of evil began.

“Me?” I asked.

“Yes, you. The one who stands at the top of the rubbish heap that is the wasteyard of lower beings. Lay down your arms and come to me.”

“Are you inviting me to join you?” Did this god of evil want to make me a henchman of his? He must have decided that I would make a better minion after 2 betrayed him and became of no use to him. He was truly shameless. “I’ll pass. I don’t know what you might try and make me do.”

“I’ve had my eye on you from the very beginning. The you from the parallel

world—2, was it? The only reason I started with her is because she was easier to control. I don't mind in the least adjusting my plans and having you kill 2 instead."

"Excuse me? You're calling *me* easy to control?" 2 snapped. "Funny you should say that after I've betrayed you! Also, there's no way she'd ever kill me."

"As for your reward..." Kugelschreiber continued cajoling me, ignoring 2. No matter what he proposed, I wasn't going to waver! "...if you become my henchman, I can promise you the ability to gain unlimited strength."

"What?"

"I'll start with removing the shackles keeping you at level 99. After you are held back from your potential no longer, there will be endless days of battle. Once you reach another limit, we'll discover how to surpass that as well."

My level would go up endlessly...? Oh. I see. Not that I'm interested, of course. Maybe it would be okay to get a couple of details though. It's just to get the enemy to share information. I have no other intentions.

"Go on," I said.

"Oh, I see you're interested. I should've reached out to you first if it was going to be this easy."

"Let's say the level limit of 99 were to be removed," I pressed. "How would I increase my level after that?"

"The only way to increase one's level is to take in magical energy. The most efficient method to do that is to continuously destroy quasi-living creatures created entirely of magical energy, also known as monsters. It is no different from what you've been doing until now."

I see, so it's the same thing. I get stronger, and then I go on to defeat even stronger enemies... What kind of enemy would be even stronger? The god of evil made it sound like he was going to fight beside me, but who would be our enemy?

If I asked too many questions about getting stronger, it would only make Patrick's glares stab even deeper. I decided to shift my line of questioning to ask

about the god of evil's goals.

"Who specifically are you fighting, Kugelschreiber? The being that oversees all parallel worlds wouldn't have any enemies, would he?"

"My enemies are those from other worlds."

"You oversee all the other worlds, don't you?"

"Hmm, how do I put this into words...?" the god of evil pondered. "I hold all the parallel worlds branching off a single tree in the palm of my hand. This world is one branch of that tree. Just as there isn't only one branch, there isn't only one tree. I want to conquer the rest of the forest."

Other trees would mean worlds that didn't have the same laws, that didn't share similarities with this one—to put it differently, otherworlds. Was the god unsatisfied with the worlds he already oversaw, such that he felt the need to invade otherworlds as well?

"By that, do you mean otherworlds?" I asked.

"Hm, 'otherworld'... An excellent term, succinct and perfect. You understand my meaning, don't you?"

"Those otherworlds must have beings that oversee them as well."

"Of course, and that's where you come in: my champion to go up against those beings," he said eagerly. "Those otherworlds aren't my true objective either." It appeared that his ambition went further. "One day, I had a thought: is this world truly a tree?"

"Excuse me?"

"Could it be that I only *think* that the worlds I govern are part of their own tree? What if they're actually a clump of branches on a much bigger tree? I can't deny the possibility that this world might be something like a dollhouse created by a being from a much larger world. Picture it! Those beings could be watching us from above, enjoying us as entertainment!"

"Oh...!"

I was going to say that sounds stupid, but I almost forgot. This world is the world of an otome game. There are definitely people who are enjoying this

world as entertainment. I was one of those very people.

“What’s wrong?” the god of evil asked, curious about the sound I’d made.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Please continue.”

“Well, from the perspective of those in that larger world, I’m nothing but a trivial being frolicking around in their tiny dollhouse. I’m just a clown to them!”

Man, if I tell him that this is the world of an otome game, he might just explode from anger. Also, from the way he’s talking, it sounds like the world I’m originally from might be in danger. After gathering enough powerful pawns, the god of evil will probably end up invading Japan. After being attacked by an otome game, Japan will... Wait. Maybe it’s not actually that dangerous of a situation?

Upon thinking about it, it just didn’t sound that dire. If you said a god from cyberspace was going to attack, that sounded more urgent. If you instead said it was a god from an otome game, it instantly sounded immensely unthreatening.

Well, god of evil, you’re acting pretty high and mighty, but I hate to break it to you: this is just the world of a dating simulation, buddy.

Either way, while this might’ve been the world of a fictional story, the people here were definitely alive, and they made their own choices. That seemed like enough of a qualification for somewhere to be considered a proper world.

On top of that, there was no guarantee that Japan was the “original” world either. My first life could’ve been set in the world of a manga where sorcerers were secretly battling spirits behind the scenes in modern Japan, and my previous self was simply unaware of all that. And then, the world full of even higher beings reading *that* manga might not be the original either... And so, it was an endless cycle.

I pointed this out. “Even if you were to take over the hypothetical world watching over this world, that world might be fictional, just another, bigger dollhouse.”

“Then I’ll just take over the world above that one.”

“There might be another world above even that one.”

“Even if they go on forever, I’ll just continue climbing up.” His ambition knew no bounds. Even if he were to endlessly continue invading successive worlds, how would he ever know for certain that he’d reached the root of the tree?

I can’t keep dealing with this. I wonder: can he even observe Japan, or even any part of the world where the Japan in which I lived was located?

“So... Does that world above ours actually exist?”

“Theoretically it does. I can’t observe it for myself, but there’s no doubt about it. Why don’t we show those who are blithely watching over us what we’re capable of!”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not interested.”

I really couldn’t have cared less. It’s true that I didn’t like the idea of people watching from above, saying whatever they wanted about me, maybe calling me “cute” or “crazy” or even “a gorilla.” But I already had my hands full with parallel worlds and otherworlds. I didn’t have the capacity to deal with a higher world on top of all that. I was happy now; that’s all that mattered. There was more than enough happiness for me within the world in which I lived now, without having to worry about any other.

Welp, I guess I turned down the god of evil. I hope he’ll just go home without a fight, I thought, feeling myself beginning to panic slightly.

“Yumiella...” Patrick said from beside me. “I believed in you.”

What? Did Patrick think I was going to become the ballpoint pen’s henchman? If he believed in me, past tense, that meant he was slightly doubtful of me. Why would I ever want to go around dominating otherworlds? That felt a little too rude.

I gave him a significant look to convey that I was hurt, and in response, he scrambled to explain.

“Oh, no, it’s just that you kind of lose sight of everything else when it comes to strength. I was just worried about the one-in-a-million chance that you might...”

“If I would do anything to become stronger, I would’ve taken down 2 right

away,” I pointed out. “I don’t appreciate being treated like some kind of fighting junkie.”

“Sorry about that,” Patrick apologized, sounding quite genuine. Even if he meant what he said, though, I couldn’t help but notice the skeptical tilt of his head.

I’ll deal with this later. Right now I need to focus on the god of evil. He’s this incredible, all-knowing higher being, so he wouldn’t demean himself and get upset that easily...right?

“Well, that’s it, I guess. It doesn’t look like I’ll be able to help you,” I said.

“I think you’re mistaken,” the god of evil countered. “I didn’t ask you if you wanted to join me. I ordered you to surrender yourself to my will.”

“Just asking a theoretical question here, but what would happen if I disobeyed your orders?”

“I would have no choice but to erase you from reality.”

Oh, he’s really mad.

The god of evil’s ambitions were much larger than this world. It was possible that we would fight one another in the future, but right now I didn’t want that. We were right by my house, and Ryu was going to be home soon.

I’ll just hype him up and draw things out. Then I’ll get him to go home.

“Oh, you must be very strong, Sir Kugelschreiber, god of evil,” I simpered.

“Of course I am.”

“If that’s the case, I’m not sure a small, weak lower being like me would be much help to you...”

“No matter how much strength I gather up, my powers are limited,” the god admitted. “I don’t want to waste any of my valuable resources. Just appearing in the world like this is using up my limited reserves of power. They would be drained even more if I were to engage in battle. That’s why I require strong underlings. I’ll admit, you are strong. You shall freely use that strength to serve me.”

Oh, so that's where he went with that. If he isn't willing to use his own powers, he shouldn't get upset at someone turning down his invitation... Maybe I should point that out.

"Resources are precious things. That's why I think you should just go home for now. That would definitely be the best way for you to conserve your energy for all of your upcoming battles."

"Exactly!" the god of evil said approvingly. "You understand things very well. Then I command you to erase everyone here for me!"

"Give it up already!" I snapped. "I already said I won't work for you!"

Oops, I said it. I mean, come on, can anyone blame me? He was being so annoyingly persistent.

I thought the god of evil would fly into a rage, but his voice was calm and quiet as he said, "Activate Administrator Code: Shut off targets in current space."

I was about to ask him what he was doing, but I realized my mouth couldn't move. It wasn't just my mouth, but also my arms and legs—heck, not even my eyeballs could move an inch. Patrick and 2 were just barely visible in the corner of my peripheral vision, and it didn't seem like they were moving either. They were likely frozen as well. My only lifeline was Lemn, who was hopefully still watching everything from the shadows.

"You can't move, can you?" the god of evil cackled. "This is the power of a being who is truly a god. The four of you are... Wait, four...? Oh, I see, he must be in the shadows. Lemn, was it? You're no different from humans in my eyes."

What?! Lemn can't move either? We're screwed.

The god of evil continued his diatribe, gloating over us standing there, completely frozen. "You can experience what it means to disobey me with your own bod—"

Suddenly, the god of evil was swallowed by a black pillar that shot down from the skies. A thundering sound resonated shortly after. I would recognize Ryuu's breath anywhere.

A dark-type dragon's breath could melt its target—stone, metal, or flesh, it would dissolve into a puddle. The god of evil wouldn't be able to survive that without a scratch.

"Oh bother, a dragon..." the god of evil grumbled from within the pillar of Ryu's breath.

"Activate Administrator Code: Shut off target." The breath disappeared, and the god reappeared as his usual calm, wobbling, censored self. It didn't seem like Ryu's attack had done anything. Not only that, but since he didn't utter a single roar or issue another attack, I assumed that Ryu couldn't move anymore either, frozen midwingbeat in the sky above.

I still couldn't move. No matter how hard I tried, my body wouldn't even twitch.

What do I do here? Think, Yumiella, think!

"What is going on here?!" A new voice rang out over the courtyard. "There was a terribly loud noise just now."

When it rained it poured—Eleanora had heard the sound of Ryu's molten breath, and now she'd come outside to investigate.

That's why I wanted to go somewhere else. I'm going to hold this grudge against you, 2.

"Annoyances just keep popping up one after another..." the god of evil complained. "Activate Administrator Code: Shut off target."

Darn, first Ryu, and now Eleanora's frozen too. Another strong member of our group is...not lost.

Eleanora was frozen, but that didn't really have a demonstrable effect on how this battle was going.

Well, I can't actually turn around to check, but there's no way Eleanora could resist this strange power that not a single one of us could, not Patrick, Ryu, or me—

"Oh my! It was just for a moment, but I couldn't move at all! What in the

world was that?”

“What...?!” the god of evil cried.

What...?! my confused brain echoed.

Why was Eleanora able to move? Had a hidden power within her perhaps awakened at this very moment...?

Just then, I heard a familiar voice in my ear.

“I can’t believe you’re putting Eleanora in danger again... It looks like we’re going to have to have a long talk about this some other time. Activate Administrator Code: Remove target limitations.”

“Whoa! Wait, I can move.” I turned around to see a woman with white hair and a shiny forehead. It made sense that *she* wouldn’t appear until Eleanora was in danger. My eyes widened in surprise. “You came to save us, Forehead Bestie!”

“Stop calling me that!” she snapped. “It’s Sanon! Anyways, I’m transporting you immediately. Brace yourselves!”

I remember something about Sanon being able to teleport wherever the sun is shining or something. I think she turned Lemn down when he wanted to use her like a taxi. She probably just wants to get Eleanora out of here, but I’m grateful either way.

Sanon didn’t wait for me to respond, and her magic took effect at once. The scenery before me blurred, and I found myself surrounded by an immense, blinding light.

Wait... This light really hurts.

“Ow, ow, ow!” I cried.

“Ow, ow, ow!” another voice cried.

“Ow, ow, ow!” a third person cried.

It sounded like 2 and Lemn were also being carried along in the spell. Our party had way too many members that were vulnerable to light-type attacks.

By the time the light disappeared, my surroundings had completely changed.

This is...where I first met Sanon.

It was just barren land with nothing around—the perfect place to throw down, since I didn't have to worry about damage to the surrounding area.

I turned to check who else had been teleported with me. Yumiella 2 and Lemn stood nearby, and Patrick was beside me. Sanon, the being whose powerful magic had teleported multiple people at once, was there as well. And of course, the mysterious blur that was the god of evil, now called Kugelschreiber, had come along for the ride.

“Teleportation? I'm impressed.” He didn't seem fazed by our sudden change in location. With a shrug, he added, “I can't really stop you from changing your position in this world, but it won't matter much in the end.”

All right, we're now in an open area where we don't have to worry about hurting anyone or anything around us. Now all I need to do is use every bit of my strength to take down the god of evil.

Whether I would be able to hold my own against the being that had shown himself to command strange powers of restraint depended entirely on Sanon, who seemed to know an effective countermove to those same powers.

The god of light, my ray of hope, came close to whisper in my ear. “After removing the limitations placed upon you and teleporting everyone here, I've used up most of my strength. What happens from here on out depends on you.”

“Whaaat?” I complained.

“Due to my own lack of power, I wasn't able to bring the dragon here,” Sanon admitted. “I'm terribly sorry.”

“Of course you couldn't!” I exclaimed. “There's no way you could bring him somewhere so dangerous, right?!”

“Oh, um, yes. That's it.”

Ryuu and dear Eleanora need to be protected. They shouldn't be interacting with some unknown being like the god of evil! This is bad, though; even if I can sense that Kugelschreiber is about to use his power, I can't really dodge it.

I wanted to take a moment to collect myself and talk to the others in order to come up with a plan, but the god of evil seemed unlikely to allow us that kind of advantage.

“I see that I shall have to do this over,” the god of evil sighed. “How annoying. Activate Administrator—”

Oh no, not again. He’s going to restrain our movement. I should just punch him. Punching things has, historically, solved most of my problems.

I ran up to Kugelschreiber—who still manifested as a mysterious blur of a figure—and I threw a punch with all my might. My vigorous Yumiella Punch landed right in the part of the blur that I imagined must be the god of evil’s head.

Yes, I did it! I thought to myself, just as my fist connected...and then slipped right through him. Huh...? That should’ve hit him. It definitely felt like I hit something, but my fist didn’t meet any resistance. It didn’t feel like fog or anything... What just happened?

“That won’t work,” the god of evil said, sounding only a little smug. “I’m part of a different echelon than all of you. Why did you think you would be able to touch a being you cannot clearly perceive?”

I wasn’t sure exactly how the physics of this guy functioned, but it appeared that physical attacks weren’t going to work on him.

I’ll have to use magic, then. Ryuu’s breath didn’t seem to have any effect, but we’ll see what happens when I try.

The god of evil seemed like he was about to use his powers again, so I rushed to cast a spell.

“Activate—”

“Black Hole.”

The blurry, censored-looking figure was swallowed by the black orb. The god of evil had been transported here by Sanon’s teleportation powers, so I was hoping that meant that there was a good chance that *Black Hole* would work on him.

After a moment, the black orb shrank towards its center and disappeared. *Just* the black orb disappeared. Okay, well, technically the black orb and the atmosphere within its area of effect had disappeared, but either way, *he* was still standing there, unscathed.

“What? No...” I felt myself deflate slightly.

“Your attacks won’t work on me. That spell is powerful, but it can only erase objects of the same echelon.”

It was over. I’d never fought someone who was an entire class above me in strength. On top of that, all of the opponents I’d recently come up against could’ve been taken down by using *Black Hole* just once. Deep down, my arrogance had assumed that no matter what, I’d be able to win a battle if I used magic.

Physical attacks didn’t work, and neither did magic. And it was definitely too late to try talking things out.

This is really it. It’s over. I’m so strong that you’d think my stats are bugged, but the god of evil is using actual cheat codes or something.

“I’m at the end of my rope,” I conceded.

“I respect the gracefulness with which you accept your defeat,” the god of evil admired. “Activate Administrator—”

“Don’t give up!” Patrick yelled as a stone spear shot up from the ground, piercing through the god of evil.

Don’t, Patrick. It’s not doing anything to him.

“You persistent little... Activate—”

“He has a weakness!” Patrick exclaimed as he drew his weapon and took a swing at the god of evil. The sword slipped right through him and did nothing but make the blur wobble slightly. “You must’ve noticed by now, right?!”

Man, the god of evil keeps getting interrupted... Oh!

“Activate Administrator—”

“Dark Flame.”

“Activate—”

“Black Hole.”

“Act—”

“Yumiella Punch!”

I get it now! Thank you, Patrick! I thought, giving him a look of gratitude, and Patrick returned a firm nod in response. *This guy can’t use his powers without saying, “Activate Administrator Code,” or whatever his catchphrase is. Not only that, but our attacks interrupt him from saying it. As long as we attack when the first “A” leaves his mouth, we can completely stop him. I just have to be careful not to use spells that attack from an enemy’s shadow, like Shadow Lance, since that indistinct blur doesn’t cast shadows.*

“Using such nettling little methods...” the god of evil grumbled, obviously irritated. “How long do you plan on keeping this up?”

“If punching you once doesn’t work, I’ll just punch you a hundred times,” I said. “If a hundred won’t work, I’ll just punch you a thousand times. If that doesn’t work, I’ll just keep going until I take you down.”

“How absurd—”

“Black Hole... Oh, wait. That was the ‘a’ in ‘absurd,’ my mistake. Could you stop saying other words that start with ‘a’? It’s confusing.”

I was starting to get into the rhythm of things. Even an enemy that appeared undefeatable at first glance could be outmaneuvered in many different ways. You could get a strange man to teach you a special breathing technique that created ripples, have a mysterious old guy afflict your enemy with the Concept of Death, or throw a purple Pikmin at your foe. Those were, admittedly, all methods that relied on someone else, but there were many other approaches as well, and I was going to test them one by one.

I’m honestly a bit depressed since Black Hole didn’t work for once, but I’m determined to drag this out into a battle of endurance from hell, bwa ha ha! This is all thanks to Patrick. I have a boyfriend picking me back up when I’m down. This is awesome.

“Thank you, Patrick,” I called to him.

“Of course. That whole bit about ‘if one punch isn’t enough’ was awesome, by the way.”

“What? Why are you flirting with me all of a sudden?!”

“I’m terribly in love with that side of you.”

Huh, wait, what, huh? He was supposed to smile flippantly at me and say, “I’m not flirting.” What? Huh? Wait, what? My brain was throwing up error messages after what I thought had been a joke was taken seriously, so Patrick was doing all the heavy lifting of interrupting the god of evil’s attacks. Oh no, I need to get myself together. I can’t let Patrick do everything and wear himself out when this is likely going to be such a long battle. I need to join him. With the two of us... Hold on. We’re not the only ones here. Our party has three other members. I know it’s hard to join in with us when we’re being so lovey-dovey, but that’s no excuse for 2 and the gods to slack off.

I looked around and caught sight of 2 and Sanon having a conversation at a distance from us.

Wait, you guys are actually slacking?

“Hey, you,” 2 said to the god of light, presumably by way of greeting.

“My name is Sanon,” she corrected.

“I don’t care about your name. I have something I want to ask you. Why didn’t you resist me when I was about to kill you? You’re much stronger than the god of darkness, aren’t you?”

“The one who chose to be passive was the Sanon in your world, not me,” she pointed out.

“It’s not like you’re in my situation, with a parallel-world self who is completely crazy,” 2 snarked. “I’m sure you have a similar thought process to your counterpart, so you might be able to guess what she was thinking, right?”

My impulse was to call out to them and scold them for their inaction, but I couldn’t help but listen in on their conversation. I was totally eavesdropping, but I was also curious as to why the other world’s Sanon hadn’t put up a fight

against 2.

As I worried whether what I was doing was morally correct, the conversation progressed. Yumiella 2 continued in her belligerence, while Sanon seemed unruffled.

“I don’t think very highly of interacting with humans,” Sanon explained. “Interfering in a battle between humans is out of the question.”

“I *do* think it would be strange for a god to stick their nose into a war, but...I even killed *you*.”

“Even so, I must not interfere. A god should not go about killing a human, even if it means that god will ultimately die.”

“Excuse me? A human?” 2 echoed, a little hysterically. “How could someone who controls monsters be a human? There’s no way a single human could destroy an entire world. I’m a beast, far more terrible than the Demon Lord ever was.”

Sanon fell silent for a moment before she responded. “Yumiella Dolkness, you are, without a doubt, a human. I love humans, and you are one of them.”

“This is ridiculous,” 2 scoffed, looking away.

In contrast to Yumiella 2’s awkwardness, Sanon maintained her preferred air of nonchalant serenity, and she spoke as if she was speaking nothing but objective facts. I hadn’t noticed it until now because I’d only seen how she acted in situations involving Eleanora, but Sanon seemed to prize fairness to a disturbing degree. She wouldn’t even lay a hand on 2, who had become a world-ending calamity, because from Sanon’s perspective, 2 was still a human. As a result of Sanon’s personal philosophy of refusing to give special treatment to specific humans, she couldn’t do anything when the world, or even she herself, was facing a crisis—which surprised me when I thought about how that world’s Eleanora had likely been one of the victims of 2’s rampage.

I had missed my opening to enter their conversation, so I was just standing there, trying to figure out what to say, when Lemn finally manifested himself.

“Wow, Sanon really is incredibly tactless,” Lemn remarked.

“She’s way too tactless,” I agreed.

“Well, considering everything that happened in the past,” Lemn observed, “I’m honestly surprised that she’s actually here to help us.”

I think she got involved because she couldn’t just stand by and watch while Eleanora was in danger, not because she wanted to save any of us, or because she cared about helping us fight the god of evil.

Regardless of her motivations, the god of light had saved our lives. She had undone the power restraining us, and she had even teleported us here. Unlike her, Lemn had barely accomplished anything.

I guess it only figures; he’s basically a child, after all, I thought, looking at him. He seemed to take notice of my gaze.

“You were thinking that I’m useless, weren’t you?” he accused.

I was the picture of perfect innocence. “No, I wasn’t thinking anything like, ‘What’s the point of being in my shadow if you’re going to freeze up and do absolutely nothing?’ or anything like that... Not at all.”

“What was I supposed to do?!” Lemn snapped. “I knew he was going to use that code, but I didn’t think he would target the entire space we were standing in!”

“So what? Also, I didn’t know those moves were called codes.”

“He’s famous for being really hesitant about using those powers, you know?!”

No, I don’t know. Why does he keep saying these things like they’re common knowledge? Fine, Lemn seems surprisingly worried about his lack of participation thus far, so I’ll ask him to play a huge role going forward—one that only he can pull off.

“We don’t have time to be talking like this. Can you pull out that sword?” I asked him urgently.

“Oh, the one I was holding on to for you. Okay.” Lemn swiftly reached into his shadow, pulled out the sword, and plopped it unceremoniously into my hands.

This isn’t what we agreed on. He was supposed to pull it out in a really cool and flashy way. Why did I even leave it with him in the first place if he isn’t

going to put on a performance when he pulls it out?

Despite the disappointment, I begrudgingly accepted the secateur from him. Sanon, who was clearly keeping an eye on Lemn, let out a piercing scream.

“Why do you have that?!” she demanded.

“I-I know it’s dangerous,” I reassured her.

“What that weapon can accomplish is far beyond the realm of ‘dangerous’! How did you even gain possession of such a horrid object...?”

Sanon didn’t seem to like the secateur very much. Perhaps there was a basic incompatibility between them, this being an object of pure darkness and her being the goddess of light. Still, it felt like she was overreacting. It wasn’t like the sword was going to eat her or anything.

I have a mountain of complaints about Lemn failing to put on a suitably ostentatious sword-summoning performance, but like I said to him, I don’t have time to waste. Yumiella 2’s starting to add to our concentrated flurry of attacks on the god of evil, which is giving us a little room to breathe, but I should probably join in as well. I guess I’ll forgo trying to pull out the sword in a cool way too, I thought, quickly unsheathing the black blade so that I didn’t have enough time to be disappointed about it.

“Secateur, O blade that prunes the branches of the world, come to my hand!” I commanded.

“Huh?” Lemn turned to me. “Did you say something?”

“Nope,” I said, pretending that he hadn’t just heard me chanting under my breath. Internally, the side of me that loved dramatically announcing my next move in a fight was at war with the side of me that was embarrassed.

Let’s hurry up and settle things with the god of evil before my internal conflict settles on a winner.

It was possible that the secateur was powerful enough to have an effect on the god of evil. I ran up to him and took a swing.

“Maybe this will do it!” I exclaimed, but it did not, in fact, do it. His blurry

figure slightly wobbled, just as it did when attacking him with any other method.

“I see, so *you* had it...” the god of evil observed calmly, completely unaffected by the seigneur. “I might have been the one who lost it, but it is still rightfully mine. I’ll use this opportunity to take it back.”

“Darn, I thought this would work,” I complained.

“No matter how much power an object possesses, it matters little if you are incapable of drawing out its strength,” he said.

“Oh! You’re referring to the key that unlocks the sword’s power!” I exclaimed. “What’s the key?! Give me a hint! I’ll settle for a hint!”

“Wh-Why are you reacting like that...?” the god of evil asked, seeming troubled for the first time.

Why does he seem kind of weirded out by me now? I can’t really make out his expression or his body language, but I can tell that he’s disturbed. I guess it was rude of me to demand information like that, my bad.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t keep down my curiosity,” I explained. “I just think that there’s something so exciting about an item that can’t exert its full power without meeting some sort of requirement. It’s not like there’s a literal metal key, is there? Just finding that out would be enough for me.”

“W-Well, yes... Just as you say, there are certain requirements, and it is those which are referred to as ‘the key.’”

“I knew it! Of course there are requirements!”

“I still do not understand why you’re reacting like this...” The god of evil had no visible eyes, but I still got the impression that he was looking at me suspiciously.

Now that I had received the answer to my question, I was satisfied. I wanted to ask him about the details of these requirements, but that would’ve been greedy of me. I mulled over whether I should give up or try and ask regardless, with no expectation of an answer, when the god of evil continued offering information on his own.

“In order to unlock the secateur’s power, one must know the name of the blade,” he said, evidently having moved on from being disturbed by my line of questioning. “In other words, the true name of the sword.”

“That sounds so epic!” I exclaimed. “It’s so fitting! I love it!”

“Are you all right...?”

Aw, is Kugelschreiber worried about me? I didn’t think he was the kind of being who cared about the well-being of others...

The god of evil cleared his throat before he continued, perhaps noticing that I found his actions curious. “So, regarding the name of the sword... I believe I’ve already spoken it.”

“No, you haven’t.” I was confident I would have remembered that if it had actually occurred.

“Is that so? Wait... That’s right. It was *you*, just the one from the parallel world,” he said with a theatrical chuckle as he cast his attention towards 2.

You’d expect the name of this sword to be valuable information, so why did he reveal it to 2? Not only that, but why did he go out of his way to tell me that 2 knows it? Maybe knowing the name of the sword isn’t enough, or maybe he’s setting a trap, or maybe... Whatever, all that doesn’t matter!

“Yumiella 2, you know the name, right?!” I called over my shoulder. “Tell me, please?”

“Have you lost your mind?” 2 grumbled. “What’s wrong with you?”

Oh no, she’s being unreasonably grumpy, as usual. I can’t have her clam up now.

I wanted to clap back and ask her if she had lost her mind, but instead I used my most affable voice to say, “I might have lost my mind! But I think I might find it again if you tell me the name of the sword.”

“Ew, weirdo...”

“Weirdo? That’s a pretty unique name for a sword... I’m not as excited about it anymore.”

“Not the sword, I’m saying *you’re* a weirdo.”

Oh, she was commenting on how I was acting. I’m glad that’s not actually the name of the sword.

While us Yumiellas were having this fun little chat, the god of evil was using any chance he got to try and use his cheat codes, but Patrick stopped him each time.

Sorry for leaving you alone, Patrick.

“There’s obviously something more to it!” my fiancé exclaimed, keeping his gaze locked on the blur that was the god of evil. “Even if she’s willing to tell you, don’t use it to unlock the sword’s power!”

I can’t do that, my curiosity is going kill me. Actually, in this situation, dying like a cat doesn’t sound so bad.

If I were to refuse and say I wanted to unlock it anyway, Patrick and I would surely get into an argument. As I stood there, unsure of how to answer him in a way that would leave us both satisfied, 2 rendered the whole argument moot.

“It’s fine. I think he told me, but I’ve forgotten it.”

“Excuse me?!” I exclaimed. “What’s wrong with you?! Have you lost your mind?!”

“That’s the last thing I want to hear from you,” 2 snarled. “Why should I have remembered the name of a sword I’d never even seen before?”

What? No way...what a bummer. I’d love to at least know what kind of name it is. How I feel about it would significantly change depending on whether it’s a name like Mikazuki Munechika or a name like Durendal.

I was about to beg 2 to at least tell me what sort of name it was when I heard a faint voice. I could definitely hear it, but it sounded strange in an alarmingly familiar way—I couldn’t tell whether it was pitched high or low.

“I see that it won’t work... I have no choice but to use my powers.”

The moment I heard the god of evil’s disturbing words, I felt a bottomless pit of fear gnawing open within me. Up to this moment, I had clung to the idea that we could easily suppress him even if our attacks didn’t work, but right now, he

was revealing himself to be unimaginably powerful and undeniably terrifying.

Patrick was currently the member of our party standing closest to the god of evil, something I hadn't thought of quickly enough to yell something like, "You're in danger! Move!" Without a warning, Patrick was sent flying.

"Patrick?!" I dashed towards him without thinking, which meant that I took my eyes off the god of evil.

Any opening would lead to the god of evil using his cheats to freeze us all helplessly in place. With Sanon unable to use her powers, we had no way to recover from his attacks. By the time I realized the gravity of the situation, the god of evil was already close to finishing his code incantation.

"Activate Administrator Code: Shut off targets in current—"

I tried to think as fast as I could, my mind moving quickly enough that my surroundings were starting to look like they were in slow motion.

How do I stop him? I could get up close and use a physical attack. No, that won't work. I don't have enough time.

What about Black Hole? No, that spell requires a short charge before it's activated, and there's also some time before the black orb disappears. It's usually quick enough that I wouldn't worry about it, but even the time it takes to blink is precious right now.

Then what about Shadow Lance? It casts right away, but, ugh, he doesn't have a shadow. We're also in an open field, so there aren't any other shadows near enough to him that I could use. Nope, not that.

Dark Flame? It shoots out from the tip of my finger, and it's as fast as a fireball—which means it's relatively slow. It won't make it in time.

I could throw the sword in my hand at him. It would be faster than Dark Flame at the very least. I don't know if even that would make it fast enough though.

This time, it really felt like it was going to be the end of us. The distance between me and the god of evil was less than thirty meters, but it felt incredibly far.

I guess I'll at least attempt the action with the highest chance of success, I

thought, holding up my sword. *Man, even the time it takes to flex my muscles feels like wasted milliseconds.*

Just as I had locked onto my target, I realized that something felt off. It wasn't the blurry figure himself, but rather the ground at his feet. The area directly below him was pitch-black—I could see a distinct, round, inky shadow below him. I had no time to think; if there was a shadow, then I could use *that* spell, the one with almost no time lag before activation.

"Shadow Lance!" Black spears shot out from the ground at an extreme speed and pierced the god of evil.

"Curses! Foiled again," the blurred god snapped, sucking his teeth in frustration.

I used that moment to close in on him.

Things are okay now. That was really close, though. I can't believe that this battle did a complete one-eighty in less than a second.

The mysterious shadow that had saved me disappeared at once, and Lemn's voice resonated from within my own shadow.

"I need to pull my weight too," he said.

"You made that shadow, Lemn?"

"Have you forgotten that I'm the god of darkness? That much is child's play for me."

"Can you maintain a shadow continuously right under the god of evil, then?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, conjuring that one shadow really tired me out."

It appeared that Lemn was quite a feeble god. I couldn't believe that he was in pain after creating a shadow on the ground for a single moment. But regardless of the remarkable weakness of his constitution, he had saved me from a predicament, so I decided to not comment on his lack of stamina.

I turned my full attention from Lemn back to the god of evil. As long as I stayed focused on him, both *Black Hole* and melee attacks would stop him in time to prevent him from using his cheat codes. I wasn't going to make the

same mistake again.

The other thing I had to be cautious of was whatever attack had sent Patrick flying earlier. I had only managed to sneak a quick glance at him, but that was enough to confirm that he was all right.

I wonder what caused that shock wave that Kugelschreiber created. I need to make sure I pay attention and don't miss any movements that might signal a new attack, I thought. Just as I had determined that I would make sure to be on guard no matter what, I realized that my body had started to feel a strange floating sensation.

"Huh?" My confusion was short-lived as I found myself flung back and sent flying.

I was being so careful, I huffed, annoyed by the unfairness of it all. *I didn't stop looking at him for even a single moment.*

The shock wave that had thrown me off my feet was clearly one of the god of evil's attacks, but it hadn't been signaled by any preceding movements or chants—I assumed that it was likely impossible to detect when it would happen. Luckily, it wasn't too powerful an offensive move, and it didn't seem to have any kind of demonstrable physical effect on Patrick or me. All it did was send us flying back, but in this situation, that in itself could be fatal to us.

"Activate Administrator—"

He was doing it again. I wanted to make a comment about how uninspired his moves were, but since we were once again in a crisis, it didn't seem like the time for it.

I shot out a bolt of pure magical energy and used that momentum to reposition myself midair. That itself used up quite a bit of mana. I glanced at the god of evil, noting that he seemed to have moved a bit. It sent a shiver down my spine thinking that he might have been using magic without any regard to its potency.

"Black Hole." I cast one of the strongest dark magic spells once again, as I had done countless times today, and although it again did no damage, it at least stopped the god of evil from using his code. As I landed on the ground, Patrick

ran up to me.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine. I’m glad you seem okay too.”

“Yeah, but...this is bad.”

“I agree. I’m not sure what to do here.”

We hadn’t yet come up with an effective way to take down the god of evil, and all we had managed so far was to test his patience in a long battle of endurance—all we could do was attack when he began to chant his code and keep endlessly interrupting him. We might be able to keep this up for several days if we took turns sleeping. We might even find a solution during that time, or maybe the god of evil would get bored and back down.

However, things were different now that the god of evil had introduced the shock wave attack to the proceedings. Even if it didn’t do any actual damage, being physically knocked back without any way to stop it was detrimental to our long-term strategy. We were only barely able to keep up after Patrick and I had both been blown back in turn.

As long as we keep our guard up, we should be able to still keep the god of evil from speaking the entirety of the code, but if he keeps knocking us down with his shock wave, I don’t think we could do it for hours on end.

“Not having a proper way to attack him makes things hard,” Patrick observed.

“It’s tough to keep this up,” I agreed.

“He must still have some moves up his sleeve,” Patrick said. “We won’t be able to fight back if he plays his wild card after we’re exhausted.”

“Even just being unable to move like earlier would pretty much mean instant death for us.”

On paper, the current situation didn’t sound too dire: if the god of evil was able to complete his chant, we would be rendered motionless. However, this was a battle, and being unable to move in battle basically meant we were dead.

His code finally freezing us in place might even be more annoying than a direct attack that would kill us. We can’t even use our last resort, our elixirs, if we can’t

move. Wait... Would elixirs make us able to move if we're frozen? I should ask Lemn.

"Hey, Lemn!" I hissed, directing my stage whisper down towards my shadow. "Can you use elixirs to counteract the effects of that code thing?"

"I think you can, but...who would actually be able to use one? He's going to freeze everything in this entire space."

Oh, I see. We're up against an enemy that can essentially instakill the whole party. This is rough. This just reinforces the fact that the way elixirs work is still a mystery though. Just like I thought, rather than a revival potion, they're more like... No, I don't have time to be thinking about this right now.

"Okay, let's split up so we're more difficult to target," I suggested to Patrick.

"Got it," he said.

We both nodded to each other before running in opposite directions. Even if one of us was to be knocked back, the other could attack. As long as we took turns attacking, we should be fine.

"What pesky and desperate little methods you've resorted to," the god of evil grumbled as he sent me flying once more.

Now that it's happened again, I can see that he doesn't seem to telegraph the shock wave attack at all. I haven't noticed any sign that it's coming. There's just no way to block it. He got me, so I'll leave it to you, Patrick, I thought, just in time to see my boyfriend also get tossed into the air out of the corner of my eye. No way! It works in all directions? Isn't that a bit overpowered? If I were the god of evil, I would've come up with a really cool name for a move so strong... Oh wait, that actually makes it even more annoying, because it doesn't have a name or anything.

"I'll get him!" I yelled. Patrick could save his strength for later.

Just as I had done earlier, I repositioned myself with a burst of magical energy so that I could use my magic, when all of a sudden, the god of evil was swallowed by a black orb, one that I had not created. The only other person who could use *Black Hole* aside from me was Yumiella 2.

“So? Do you think you can win?” she asked in a carefree manner, walking up to my side as I landed.

“Can you maybe say something if you’re going to help?! I wasted that mana for nothing!”

“I see, so it’s looking pretty bad. I guess you’re not that impressive after all,” she observed, sounding a little bit smug.

“Excuse me?” I snapped. “Maybe I should take you down first.”

“I see, so you *do* get it.”

Huh? What do I get? Before I could voice my questions, a smile spread across 2’s face.

“I know a way to defeat him,” 2 said in a jovial tone.

“What? Really?!”

“Do you really think I would start a fight with the god of evil with no plan? I’ve had a plan since the very beginning.”

“Wow, that’s incredible, Miss 2. Why didn’t you say something earlier, punk?” I had intended to compliment 2 for once, but my true feelings slipped out towards the end.

I mean it though. She should’ve said something before. What were we doing all that attacking for until now? So, what is this plan of hers...?

Yumiella 2 seemed like she was having the time of her life. Objectively, her outward demeanor didn’t read as that of someone who was enjoying themselves, but judging her expressions on the Yumiella spectrum, keeping in mind her usual flat affect, she seemed to be truly merry.

“I won’t tell you,” she said.

“What?”

“I’m going to lead the charge, and you’ll figure out the rest of the plan as we go.”

“Pardon?” I sputtered.

“I need you to block his view. Cast *Black Hole* in as large a diameter as you can

around him.”

Yumiella 2 was truly despicable. If she was going to be my ally, I wished she would just *act* like it for once.

I wouldn't be surprised if she someday gets shot from behind because of that terrible attitude of hers.

Regardless of how I felt about her, I was going to do my part. I had no plan whatsoever—I had no choice but to follow hers.

I gestured to Patrick, who was currently positioned behind the god of evil, to stay back, and then I looked to 2 for confirmation.

“Cast it now?”

“I’m ready whenever,” she responded. I was skeptical; she didn’t seem like she was ready for anything, considering how nonchalantly she was standing beside me.

Is she really ready? Whatever, let's do this. Black Hole, cast as large as I can. I can aim the center at the god of evil and make it big enough that it just barely doesn't reach us.

I made my move. “*Black Hole!*”

A jet-black orb appeared. It was positioned so that the bottom half of the sphere was in the ground, which probably made it appear as a dome from above, but from my perspective it just looked like a black wall.

Just then, 2 leaned in and whispered in my ear, “I’ll leave the rest to you, Yumiella 1.”

“Huh?” The way she’d said it was uncharacteristically solemn. It was also, I realized, the first time she had actually called me “1.”

I turned to look at her and see what was going on, but she had already started running forward—forward into the black wall of darkness.

“Look out!” I screamed at her.

She didn’t even slow. “The name of the sword is...”

When you cast the spell *Black Hole*, there was a time lag between the

appearance of the black orb and the moment it disappeared, taking everything inside the area of effect with it. As long as you moved during that very short period between spell phases, it was possible to dodge it. The opposite was also true—if you ran into it during that time period, then...

She did it. Yumiella 2 jumped into the darkness.

The black orb began to shrink towards its center, erasing everything within its diameter from existence. In the blink of an eye, the large, black orb was gone, and it had taken Yumiella 2 along with it.

“What...?” I wasn’t quite able to process this.

A giant crater yawned before me. There was always a change in atmosphere after this spell was cast, since it took all of the air with it when it disappeared, so I was hit by tailwinds that were so strong that it felt like my legs were going to fly off. At the center of the enormous hole was the god of evil, who was standing there just as he had been before. Yumiella 2, however, was gone.

“There’s no way...” I whispered.

No, this isn’t happening. Something’s wrong here. Yumiella 2’s probably just hiding somewhere, and any minute now, she’s planning to launch a sneak attack on the god of evil.

I felt dazed as I stood and scanned my surroundings. She was nowhere to be seen, and there wasn’t anywhere she could be hiding.

No... There’s no way, right?

“Huh...?” I suddenly felt the oddest sensation, and I realized that it was the feeling of highly condensed magical energy flowing into my body, a dark magical energy so dense that it was visible to the eye. The reality that I was attempting to avoid was being shoved in my face. This energy... What was happening right now was...

“Aaah...”

My body was absorbing so much magical energy at an incredible speed that it was starting to make me feel sick. Despite that, the magical energy felt right at

home in my body, like it was something I was used to. That was only natural—it was the remnants of another Yumiella, after all.

“I haven’t felt this in a while,” I mumbled to myself.

It was something I hadn’t experienced in several years—I had leveled up. Only this time, I felt my strength skyrocket in a way I had never experienced before.

I had become stronger, to an explosive degree. Now that my body had this new strength, I could no longer deny her death. Yumiella 2 had willingly jumped into my spell and sacrificed her life.

“Hm, I see you’ve reached a higher echelon,” the god of evil observed casually, seeming entirely at ease. “So, which one are you? The one from this world, or the one from the parallel world?”

He couldn’t even tell us apart? What a deeply loathsome guy.

As my brimming eyes blurred my vision, I recalled something Yumiella 2 had said.

“When I do die, I’m planning on bringing down some despicable fiends along with me.”

Oh, she meant she was going to bring down the god of evil too. I wouldn’t usually go along with someone trying to bring down others with them, but in this case, I’ll make an exception. Did she jump into Black Hole having thought this far ahead? I wiped away the moisture running down my face and railed against her internally with as much anger as I could muster. *Man, I really don’t like Yumiella 2. I hate you.*

As I stood there with tears coursing down my face, I felt the scales begin to tip. The god of evil had still not given up, and I could tell he was about to try and speak his code once again. Patrick ran to stop him, but his timing was a little off. He seemed to have been distracted by 2’s sudden disappearance as well.

“Activate Administrator Code: Shut off targets in current area.” The cheat code rang out in its entirety at last.

We were frozen—not even a single joint in a single one of my fingers would budge. Patrick and I were completely still, and the same was likely true for

Lemn and Sanon, although they were too far out of my field of vision for me to say for sure. Everyone in the god of evil's presence had been stopped.

Except for Yumiella 2. She isn't here, so she can move. She's inside me, so I can move.

"How disappointing," the blurred figure gloated. "You all are at the mercy of a single utterance from me."

"I don't know, it took a heck of a long time for you to get that utterance out, though," I said.

"What?!" The blur wavered, but seemed to regain its composure quickly. "I see... You were able to remove your limitations by syncing with your parallel-world self. How did you learn such a highly technical skill?"

"Huh? You can logically explain what I did? Even I thought I was being crazy," I admitted.

I had rationalized this by imagining that 2 had passed her powers on to me, but I had actually thought I was able to move because my muscles had gotten stronger when I leveled up—it looked like that wasn't quite accurate.

"No, the other version has already disappeared..." The god of evil seemed to consider me for a moment. "Could it be? Did you recreate everything in a pseudoworld?! Even if it's only partial, even I struggle to deploy a pseudoworld!"

"Uh, yep! That's exactly it. I'm more logical, or should I say intellectual, so... I'm just that kind of person."

I have no idea what he's saying! I'm trying to come off as smart, like I know what he's saying, but I don't have a single clue as to what he's talking about! Honestly, I'm not sure if I care. I'm able to move; that's enough for me.

"I seem to have underestimated you," the god of evil said as he lightly swung his static-blurred arm in my direction.

I instinctively felt that I was in danger and quickly grabbed the sword that I had previously abandoned, swinging it horizontally and somehow blocking something I couldn't even see.

“Another invisible attack?!” I cried.

“How were you able to block that?!” he raged.

I felt through the sword that something had bounced off the blade. Since I hadn’t actually been able to see the attack, I’d managed to block it using only my instinct.

I’m incredible.

I looked in the direction I had swung the sword, and I noticed that the scenery seemed...slightly off.

Yeah... “Off” is the only way I can think of to really describe it.

It looked like the space itself had been cut, like a painted canvas had been sliced into two pieces and pulled slightly apart.

It’s probably some kind of spatial severance. I’m not sure about any additional effects, but it’s a thing you see pretty often in fiction. I’m so knowledgeable.

It wasn’t good to let the god of evil do whatever he wanted. I leaped over the edge of the crater and ran down its perfectly curved sides towards the center. Just as I was about to reach the bottom of the hole, the blurry figure launched itself up into the air.

“You can fly?!” I exclaimed, a little indignantly.

How many abilities is this guy hiding? The god of evil mentioned that he was about to get serious, but now it felt like he had been holding back to an extreme degree. *Didn’t you learn in school that it’s bad manners to gradually show your strength like this? If he’d been serious from the start, we definitely would’ve lost right away.*

As he looked down on me from his position in midair, the god of evil reached his arms out towards me. I braced myself, assuming something was about to happen. My hypothesis was correct, and I felt a sudden pressure that was trying to crush me from above.

He’s increased the gravitational force here. I’m almost being pushed down to my knees. Man, how much force is he exerting?

I firmly stomped on the ground and forcefully kicked myself into the air as the

soil sank beneath me, succumbing to the incredible pressure. For once, my poor physical build had saved me.

Being heavier and bigger is more advantageous in most circumstances though, so I won't give up on my dream of weighing three tons.

"How is this possible?!" the god of evil sputtered. "I locked in an irreversible force field!"

You did what? A force field is like gravity's relative, right? Are you just making things sound more complicated than they actually are, Mr. Kugelschreiber?

Redirecting the momentum from my jump, I made a beeline towards the floating god of evil. However, there was still pressure coming at me from above, which meant that I gradually lost speed as I went—at this rate, I wouldn't reach the god of evil before being pushed back to the ground.

I don't know if I can get up here again if I'm forced back down. I'm really understanding why warrior races use gravity machines to train.

Just then, a voice that was not the one in my head called out to me from below.

"Yumiella! I'm making a platform!" It was Patrick, who should've been frozen.

A mound of earth shot up like a tower, reaching my feet. I had completely lost my speed and had just begun to fall, but thankfully I landed gracefully on the top of the earthen tower. I thought about asking Patrick to use the tower to raise me up, but it was already beginning to crumble—it didn't seem like it was going to hold up against my weight when the god of evil's force field was making me tens, even possibly hundreds, of times heavier than I usually was.

I guess I have to jump again, I thought, leaping off the dirt below me as it crumbled beneath my feet.

"Come onnn!" I yelled.

I somehow made it to the god of evil. Now that we were at the same height, I could tell that he was about to pull another move, but he was too late.

God of evil, Kugelschreiber. You've been my strongest enemy to date.

This was going to be my victory only because Patrick, the gods of light and

darkness, and Yumiella 2 had made it possible.

“Why...” the god of evil cried. “Why do you have such power?”

“This is the end!” I swung down the sword of darkness, the secateur, which I’d been tightly holding on to this entire time, and...it went right through him.

“Huh...?”

What? Aren’t I supposed to win here? I thought that my attacks were going to work now that I’ve unlocked my level cap.

Despite my strength, I couldn’t keep resisting the gravitational force bearing down on me. I had worked so desperately to get up here, but after only managing to swing my blade through the blur once, I was falling down. As I fell, I tried casting *Black Hole* as a parting gift, but it didn’t do anything.

Oh, so my attacks still don’t work. So what the hell am I supposed to do?

I crash-landed, catching myself from a complete face-plant with my legs and one hand. This method left one hand free, so I was still able to hold my sword.

I see, so there is a practical benefit to a three-point landing. I’ve only been doing it because I thought it made me look cool, like a superhero, but it’s hard on the knees.

I had planned to use the force from my landing to make the ground beneath me sink, but I had landed without making much sound. It appeared that the debuff increasing the gravitational force on me had been removed.

“Oh, I’m light again.”

“It’s pretty tough that we don’t really have ways to attack him,” Patrick said to me, approaching from my flank. I hadn’t noticed him so close, so it surprised me a bit.

“Thanks for helping me earlier,” I said. “How long have you been able to move?”

“I unfroze around the time you ran down into the crater and the god of evil flew into the air. I think it’s probably because he had to allocate his powers elsewhere. It definitely wasn’t because of my own strength.”

Maybe I was the only one the god of evil was focused on. Thanks to him underestimating Patrick, I was able to leap into the air. I guess it doesn't really matter, since my attacks don't work. I really don't know what to do.

As I was agonizing about my next move, the god of evil floated down and approached us. I braced myself, and he raised his blurry arms up in a conciliatory gesture.

"Be at ease. You don't have any way to harm me in any case. I'd like to speak to you for a moment."

"You want to talk *now*? After all this?"

He seemed to shrug. "You're too strong."

"Come on, I totally am not, except I totally am." The compliment had been unexpected. Even though he was my enemy, it was still nice to hear.

I remembered who was by my side, and I glanced askance at Patrick, who was giving me a Look.

I'm sorry, I'll take this seriously.

Having dispensed with what was likely insincere flattery, the god of evil continued speaking.

"You ought to only have been under level 99 until mere moments ago. You were shackled by the limitations of this world."

"I *was* level 99," I agreed.

"And your shackles are now removed. But the only change ought to have been that you surpassed level 99. Even after taking in the magical energy of your parallel version, your strength should still be limited. What is the source of your endless strength? From where did you gain that magical energy, that experience? It's surely useful information, and I would very much like to know it."

According to the god of evil, I'd become much stronger than I should have been able to from just absorbing 2's magical energy.

I can't think of anything else I could've done... Oh, wait. Is it maybe...?

“Um, if you continue to take down monsters after reaching level 99, what would happen if you were still shackled by the limits?”

“With no place to go, that magical energy would temporarily store itself in a virtual space in order to avoid any disturbance to the laws of the world.”

“What would happen if your level cap got unlocked after that, then?”

“There would be no disturbance, so the magical energy would go to its rightful place. It would be returned to the person who...” He trailed off, realization dawning. “You scoundrel, did you...?!”

Oh, of course. I kind of regret asking.

I had spent roughly ten years of my childhood focused on level grinding. At first I was getting stronger and stronger, but at a certain point I stopped sensing any growth. That was when I was around seven years old.

After seeing how quickly Patrick had leveled up, I’d had a bad feeling about things, but everything was clear now. I had overaccumulated an immense amount of experience. At even a conservative estimate, it could’ve been enough to level more than ten people from level 1 to level 99.

Thanks, past me! I’m a bit stupid sometimes, but that’s precisely why I’m able to hold my own against the god of evil.

It wasn’t going to hurt me for him to know this, so I decided to tell the god of evil the truth.

“I believe my strength comes from all the experience I’ve continued to accrue since reaching level 99.”

“Why?”

“Huh? I just told you; that’s why I’m so strong.”

“Why did you do something so stupid?”

“Because I...expected this to happen,” I lied.

Yeah, he’s right. I’m totally, definitively an idiot. I tried to put on a brave face, but having someone point out the futility of continuing to grind after hitting the level cap is a critical hit to my psyche. I can’t be depressed right now though; I

need to collect myself.

Even though the reason I'd become so much stronger had been revealed, the fact that I still couldn't attack the god of evil hadn't changed. I had no other choice but to use *that*.

"Patrick, stand back." I hefted the sword. "I'm going to use this."

"Did you get the name from her?" Patrick asked. He shook his head at me. "Wait, this is definitely a trap."

I held the secateur with both hands.

The blade was so black that it seemed like it was sucking in the sunlight. The true name of this weapon was the key to unlocking its real power.

The god of evil was trying to get me to say its name. He's also the one who revealed the name to 2. This is definitely a trap, but it's the only thing I haven't tried. But these were her last words, so even if it's a trap, I won't regret it.

There was no way I would forget 2's last words. The name of the secateur, which was utterly unbecoming of shears that could cut off entire words, was...

"Keep Living," I whispered it as softly as I could, but the god of evil heard me.

"You fell for my trap, you fool!" He laughed maniacally. "The secateur is a blade that was created with the life force of a human of this realm! You're a human as well. Prepare to be swallowed by the power of the secateur, which was to be your last hope against me!"

This sword was incredibly bad luck, but there were no signs that I was about to get swallowed. All that had happened was that the surrounding area had gotten darker, as if it were shading towards evening. I looked around, but it didn't seem like the sun had been covered by clouds, so I wasn't sure why everything seemed so much dimmer.

Just then, I heard a scream from behind me. I looked back to see Sanon, who was floating in the air, making a fuss. Her fingers were twisted into Lemn's hair, and it seemed like she was trying to keep herself from being pulled in my direction.

"Why are you guys playing around?!" I scolded.

“D-Does this look like play to you?!” Sanon shrieked.

“Ow, ow!” Lemn cried. “Why are you grabbing my hair of all things?!” Lemn turned his attention to me. “Miss! That sword’s power comes from darkness that is created by transforming light energy!”

Light into darkness, I see. That’s why it got darker, and why Sanon’s about to be sucked into this sword.

I thought we were in a dangerous situation since it had gotten darker, but it appeared the sword was using its true power just as it was supposed to. I was quite surprised, but the god of evil was even more shocked than I was.

“Why?! Its propensity to swallow humans should be the same as it ever was... The requirements to use it safely are knowing the words that serve as its key and being something other than a human from this world. In other words, I am the only one here who should be able to use it.”

I see, so the key has two-factor authentication: the key and biometric identification. It won’t start up only with the biometric ID, and only having the password would cause the user to be swallowed by the sword. Maybe biometric identification isn’t the right word though, because a soul isn’t really biological.

“I fit both those requirements,” I said slowly.

“That’s a lie! You’re a human, aren’t you?! ”

“Anyone who’s not a human of this world can use it. That’s what you said, right?”

“You... Could it be, that soul was...?!” The god of evil flung himself abruptly into the air. His staticky appearance was erratically wobbling, as if to betray his rage.

The fact that he fled towards the sky is proof he fears the scythe. I have the weapon now, so let’s settle this.

“Patrick!” I called.

“Got it!” he responded.

Just calling his name was enough for Patrick to understand. The ground began to rise up with his magic. It wasn’t going to crumble this time, so now I had

stable footing. Fully prepared, I caught up to the god of evil, who was making a beeline towards the sky.

I held the secateur, now correctly dubbed Keep Living, down at my side. The surrounding area became even dimmer.

“Secateur!”

“I knew it!” the god of evil exclaimed. “I knew there was a higher world!”

I tightly gripped Keep Living. A massive pool of magical energy began to pour out of it, as if it were responding to my touch.

“Keep...”

“You must have enjoyed looking down at me from above!” Kugelschreiber seethed with the force of his anger. “I’ll dominate your world, no matter what it takes! No matter—”

I swung the blade. It was a swing that had no swordsmanship or skill to it at all—it was just pure brawn.

“...Living!”



The moment the attack landed, the entire world was enveloped in darkness. It was a true darkness that kept even me, with my incredibly enhanced eyesight, from seeing anything. All I could feel was the secateur in my hand, pulsing with Keep Living's overabundant, overflowing magical energy.

When the darkness cleared at last, there was no one there.



"Is it over...?" I wondered aloud as I stepped off the platform of stone that Patrick had conjured for me.

Thanks to the power of the secateur, Keep Living, the god of evil Kugelschreiber had been utterly destroyed.

Even though he had a weird name, he was strong... Oh wait, I guess I am the one who named him that.

Although I had managed to defeat the wicked god of evil, who had ultimately intended to ravage all of the worlds, even the world I'd come from, I wasn't able to fully enjoy my victory.

"You did it, miss!" Lemn exclaimed, uncharacteristically cheerful. "I can't believe you defeated him!"

"Thanks..."

"What's wrong? Aren't you happy?"

You're really going to ask me that? Kugelschreiber might have been the god of evil, but I guess even Lemn is wicked in his own way.

In contrast, Sanon, the god of light, spoke to me quite brusquely. "I'll be taking my leave, then. Yumiella Dolkness, well done on taking down the god of evil. I extend my gratitude to all humans who contributed to his downfall." With a curt nod to all, Sanon enveloped herself in light and disappeared.

Though she was being as cold as usual, something told me that she would always remember Yumiella 2.

My other self from a parallel world, Yumiella 2, was gone. She'd thrown herself into the darkness of my *Black Hole* spell so that I could become stronger. Just as she had declared that she would, she'd brought down the god of evil with her. Along with the fact that she had left me the true name of the seigneur, there was no doubt that she was the one who had ended up winning us this battle.

She didn't hesitate to bad-mouth anyone to their face, and she acted like she hated the entire world, but at her core, she was a good person—she regretted the fact that she'd destroyed her world. I didn't like her, but I couldn't hate her.

Patrick probably felt the same way. We both had no idea what to say, and an unhappy silence descended as we stood there.

After some time, Patrick finally spoke.

"Do you think that any locks of her hair might still be in the bathroom...?" he asked quietly.

"Her hair?"

Does he want something to bury in memory of her?

"You need a part of someone's body to revive them using an elixir, right? We set aside some of our hair in preparation, but not hers..."

"Oh!" I had completely forgotten about the elixirs. "Elixirs! Lemn, bring out all of the elixirs!"

"What? Just to remind you, you can't revive someone without a part of their body," the god of darkness pointed out. "Also...think a moment. Wouldn't we be better off not reviving her?"

"Stop yapping and bring out the elixirs," I demanded.

"F-Fine." The rotten bastard of a god brought out the four empty-looking bottles.

Along with the ones Patrick and I were carrying, we had a total of six elixirs. I was now regretting that we had used one to repair the cup. I pulled mine out of my pocket as well, and I was surprised to see that the bottle didn't have a single scratch on it.

It really survived all that fighting? What's this thing made out of?

"Can you give me yours too, Patrick?" I asked.

"Yumiella..." Patrick's voice was very gentle. "Just in case you haven't been hearing us, you can't use the elixir unless you have a part of your target's body. We can't bring her back to life."

"I'm not trying to bring 2 back to life," I clarified.

"Huh?" Patrick's sympathetic expression morphed into one of suspicion. Perhaps I hadn't clarified enough.

"Reviving 2 would only cause problems," I explained. "I don't like her, so I don't want to live with her, but it would also be troublesome if she created issues elsewhere and ruined my reputation."

"Yumiella, do you understand what you're...?" Patrick didn't finish his thought and just trailed off.

Oh, he's definitely misunderstanding things, but I don't want to waste time explaining myself.

"Yeah, you're right, miss!" Lemn jumped in, as if to make up for Patrick falling silent. "It would be strange to have two of you in the same world."

"Stay out of this, Lemn. All right then, let's head out."

The destination I had in mind was close by—the grass fields right outside Dolkness Village. It was also the place where I had first met Yumiella 2.

Feeling impatient, I broke into a run. Patrick still hadn't said anything, but he followed, while Lemn slipped into my shadow.

We found the place easily enough. It had been just yesterday that she'd arrived, so I remembered the spot well.

"It was here, right?" I looked to Patrick for confirmation.

"What are you planning to do?" he asked.

It'll probably be easier to explain things once we're there.

I unsheathed the jet-black sword and spoke the key to unlock its true power.

“Secateur, Keep Living.”

My plans are going to fall apart if this doesn't work. I'm counting on you, secateur.

I sliced the spot where I remembered the dimensional warp appearing, the doorway between our worlds through which Yumiella 2 had stepped.

“Nice!” I congratulated myself. “I guess I was able to just do it by feel after all!”

“What? A door leading out of this world?!” Lemn exclaimed in shock. “What are you doing, miss?!”

A warp in space had appeared before us. It looked exactly the same as the one 2 had come through. It should be obvious where the door led.

“Let's go, then,” I said. “I'll explain things over there.”

I jumped into the warp without any hesitation. I felt a strange sensation, like someone had grabbed my brain and was giving it a good, hard shake, and I closed my eyes against the discomfort.

The shaking quickly stopped, and when I opened my eyes there was a completely different view before me. Patrick appeared right behind me.

“This is...the Royal Palace?” he said, scanning our surroundings.

“Yeah, it looks like we're on one of the balconies of the Royal Palace,” I confirmed.

Our vantage point provided a view of the entirety of the Royal Capital of Valschein. I should've been able to instantly recognize the city, but it took me some time to realize where we were, because this version of the Royal Capital was somewhat different from the one I was used to seeing.

The main streets should've been bustling with people, but the pavement was utterly deserted. The walls that surrounded and protected the capital were broken in several places. There were also numerous buildings that had sustained significant structural damage.

While I had spent three relatively peaceful years at the Academy, 2 had been corrupted by the god of evil and instead spent her time level grinding and

preparing for conquest. By the time I had returned to Dolkness County as the new lord of the territory in my world, 2 had destroyed everything in hers.

This, the view before me, was all that remained. As someone who'd been fortunate enough to have a pretty enjoyable life, I felt like I had no right to judge her.

"It looks like she really did a number on this world... I'm assuming she used monsters," I mumbled, surveying the damage.

"This is..." Patrick blanched. "I thought I understood what she'd done, but to think it was to this degree..."

This Royal Capital wasn't the one we knew. This was 2's Royal Capital, amid the crumbling remains of her world.

It's a parallel world, so I'll call it World 2 to make things simpler.

"I get it now," Patrick said, looking over the destruction as if he were trying to burn the image into his mind. "You're thinking that we'll be able to find her hair in this world."

"I already said I'm not reviving 2," I said. "It would just be cruel to revive her and make her live in this world all alone."

"Then what are you going to do?"

The stage was set—it was finally time to explain my plan.

"What do you think an elixir really is?" I asked Patrick.

"Isn't it an item used for resurrection...?" he answered hesitantly.

"We were able to use it on the broken teacup though, if you recall. I guess you *could* say that the cup was resurrected, but don't you think it's strange that resurrecting the cup made the hot tea in it reappear as well?" Thinking of it as an item used for resurrection carried certain strong implications. But something else entirely had come to my mind to better explain how it all worked when I remembered the teacup.

"So what do you consider an elixir to be, then?" Patrick asked.

“A time machine.”

“A time *what?*”

That’s a pretty boring reaction. I was expecting something like, “N-No way!” I guess that wasn’t a proper comparison. I’ll explain it better this time.

“Elixirs can turn back the time of whatever you target with them.”

“Turn back time?”

“The dead come to life. Broken teacups are fixed, and the tea inside returns. Today becomes yesterday.”

“So, what do you plan on doing, then?”

He still can’t tell? Patrick is surprisingly slow right now. I guess my plan is something possibly even more taboo than reviving the dead, so for someone who values conventional common sense like Patrick, it might not be something he’d ever consider.

I hope he’ll agree to my plan. It would make me really happy.

“I’m going to turn back this world’s time!” I announced.

We’ll resurrect the world using elixirs! We’re going to stick the whole world in a time machine, and bring it back to before Yumiella 2 destroyed it! She and all the people she killed will all come back to life!

I looked at Patrick hopefully. “So... What do you think?”

Patrick was staring at me, lost.

I guess it’s a little too extreme. But I’m still going to do it. Even if he’s against me, even if he hates me for it, I’m going to do it, no matter what.

Before Patrick could respond, a different voice did so from my shadow.

“No way! You can’t do that!” Lemn exclaimed. “That’s insane! Turning the world’s time back would destroy order! Who knows what kind of negative effects that could have?! Come on, mister! Stop her!”

I’m not asking for your opinion, Lemn. Encouraged by Lemn, Patrick finally opened his mouth to respond. *Oh, he’s going to say no, isn’t he?*

“I... This is the side of you that I fell for, Yumiella. You might lack common sense, but you don’t do things that are wrong. You’re misunderstood, but you’re kind.”

“So...you’re not against it?”

He sighed. “You’re going to do it whether I agree or not, right?”

“Um, well, yeah.”

“You also have a strong heart that doesn’t waver. You’re the best.” Patrick favored me with a gentle smile. “I love you, Yumiella.”

My mind went blank at his sudden confession. Lemn was yelling something, but none of it registered.

I see. Now I’m even more motivated. Let’s do it. Let’s turn back time for this world.

“All right, let’s get started.”

I pulled the six elixirs from my pocket. I held three of the small bottles in each hand, gripping the necks between my fingers.

I recalled that Lemn had mentioned that the bigger the target was, the more mana it would take for the elixir to work. After 2’s sacrifice, however, my mana had increased to a level incomparable to my previous reservoirs, so I was pretty sure that I’d probably be able to resurrect an entire world.

I began pouring all the magical energy I could into the six elixirs.

“My target is this world!” I cried. “And its stars and all of outer space! I command the time of every being and every object to turn back!”

The elixirs began to pulse with searing light, bright enough to obscure my hands.

Turn back, turn back, turn back, I chanted internally as I desperately continued to pour every ounce of magical energy that I could muster into the bottles. *I don’t care if I use up all of my mana; all I can do right now is keep filling these with power.*

Change came immediately. I looked up at the sky, and I saw that the sun was

moving at a rapid speed, from west to east. The world was going backwards.

“Turn back, turn back, turn back!” I continued the chant, vocalizing it aloud with the intensity of my concentration.

“You’re doing it! Go, Yumiella!” Patrick cheered.

Given the current speed that things were reverting, it didn’t seem like we’d be able to get back to before the world was destroyed—I needed things to go faster.

Turn back, turn back. Turn back, world! Rewind!

The backwards movement of the world sped up, and the sun was now moving so fast that I couldn’t track it with my eyes. It became day, then night, then day again in an instant. It was like the sky had transformed into a flickering fluorescent light.

The elixir I was holding in my right hand between my index and middle fingers cracked and crumbled into dust. It appeared that I was starting to reach the limit. A second and third bottle then followed the first, shattering and dissolving into nothing.

“No, not yet!” I cried out. “More! Turn back more!”

Not only were the elixirs almost drained of their power, but I was close to my limit too. I’d never expended so much magical energy at one time in my entire life. I’d probably used enough mana to cast *Black Hole* several thousand, no, tens of thousands of times. I was using an amount of mana that could possibly destroy multiple worlds in order to revive Yumiella 2’s world.

Just as the final elixir disintegrated, the backwards movement of the world ground to a halt. With each second, time was moving forward—the passage of time in this world was returning to normal.

I was gasping for breath, but I couldn’t rest yet; I had to know the results of my efforts.

“Did I...make it in time...?” I wheezed.

“Yeah, take a look,” Patrick said, pointing to the Royal Capital below.

Grasping the rail of the balcony for support, I could see a crowded, bustling main street, the large church restored to all of its glory, and the capital walls standing tall. It was the lively townscape with which I was so familiar.

I did it. It's a success.

"The sun rose and set roughly three hundred times, so you turned back time to around a year ago," Patrick explained. Count on him to have kept track. "You really worked hard, Yumiella."

My body almost went limp from relief. Even standing was painful. I stumbled and almost fell over, but Patrick caught me.

"Not yet, I'm not done yet," I said. "I need to see 2."

As far as the timeline of this world went, I was guessing that it was probably a little bit after Alicia and the party of other heroes had taken down the Demon Lord. Right at this moment, Yumiella 2 was likely hating the entire world and thinking of destroying it. Unless I convinced her otherwise, all of my efforts would be wasted.

I couldn't brute force it like I usually did. I had to persuade her that destroying the world would only leave her with nothing but misery and regret, that the world was a surprisingly good place—I needed to get through to her heart.

Can I get through to her and really speak to her heart? What words do I need to communicate these thoughts? But first, I need to find her. Where is 2?

I tried to start walking, but I almost fell over instead, and Patrick had to support me once more.

Suddenly, I found myself saved from the trouble of searching.

"What are you doing in a place like this in the middle of the day?"

This voice! I turned around and saw myself. It was Yumiella Dolkness, dressed in the Royal Academy uniform—the Yumiella 2 of the past.

"Oh, um..." I sputtered uselessly.

"Oh, you're...me?" She raised a scornful eyebrow. "You seem pretty weakened for being me. A me that's a small fry isn't me at all."

“Excuse me? A me that doesn’t have a boyfriend to support her isn’t me at all!” I responded at once to her challenging tone, clapping right back.

Why is she trying to pick a fight when this is the first time we’ve met?

“Well, um,” 2 began as she stopped glaring at me and averted her gaze. “I should thank you, I guess. So thanks.” She seemed uncertain, and her eyes were starting to brim over as she continued. “I’ll do better this time.”

“Do you perhaps...have your memories?”

She had definitely said “this time,” which indicated to me that she was aware that time had been rewound in this world. I wasn’t sure how, but Yumiella 2 still had her memories of meeting me and defeating the god of evil.

That’s good. She remembers all of the good times: the time we repeatedly insulted each other, and the time we kept rolling on top of each other and punching each other, and the time we... Well, I guess they’re not great memories, but she remembers them all.

I was stunned into silence by the wave of emotion crashing over me.

“What’s that face you’re making?” 2 asked, her tone reverting to something more characteristically brash. “Just you see, I’m going to become even stronger than you, and gain a higher standing in society, *and* find a better boyfriend than you!”

I snorted. “I don’t think you’ll succeed on the boyfriend thing.”

“Excuse me? I could easily find a fiancé or two if I wanted to.”

“I mostly meant that you can’t find someone better than Patrick, but the fact that you took it that way must mean that you’re aware of your lack of popularity.”

“Wh—?!” 2 gasped. “He’s nothing special. Every part of him is just normal. How dreadfully boring.”

“All right, let’s fight!” I yelled.

I’ll use my fists to show her how much stronger I am.

I was about to leap towards Yumiella 2, but I was held back by Patrick laying

his hands on my shoulders.

“Don’t stop me!” I exclaimed. “She’s insulting you, Patrick!”

“Why does this always happen?” he sighed in resignation. “Can’t you guys get along now?”

No way. I hate 2.

I thrashed around in an attempt to escape Patrick’s grasp, but I couldn’t muster up enough strength to break free.

I thought I’d powered up! What’s wrong with me? I guess I should get rid of Patrick first, and then I’ll take care of 2. It’s all to protect his honor, so I have no other choice.

Yumiella 2 ignored our banter as she leaned forward over the balcony railing and looked down.

“Have you forgotten where you are?” she asked. “Can you get going already? If you cause any trouble here, it’s going to be my fault.”

“Hey, are you trying to run?!” I accused.

“Take care, Yumiella 1.”



With that, Yumiella 2 vaulted over the railing of the balcony down to the street below.

Forget where I am...? This is a balcony at the Royal Palace, of course. I'm here because she came to my world and... I thought all of this before I realized, Oh, wait, if we're here for this long someone might find us. That would be suspicious.

Just as I finally realized the danger of our current location, a furious voice yelled from within the palace.

“Who goes there?!”

“Oh shoot, we need to go.”

Patrick swept me up into his arms, and we jumped together into the dimensional warp.

And so, after saving an entire world, and after saving one girl in particular, we returned at last to our world.

Epilogue

A week had passed after all the commotion with Yumiella 2 and the god of evil. I'd spent much of it feeling unwell, but I was finally starting to feel like my usual self again.

Ever since, things had been nothing but peaceful here. Once again, Eleanora, always an irrepressible ball of energy, was barging into my room unannounced.

"Yumiella, I've brought a gift for you!" she bubbled. "It's a loaf of bread in the shape of a bear!"

"Thank you... Where did you get this?"

"The church held an event where children gathered to bake bread together! His Holiness invited me to join them, so I helped out!"

"So, you weren't a participant...?"

"No, I helped run the event!" she said proudly.

Though it was unclear to me whether Eleanora was being entirely truthful, what I did know was that Eleanora had been visiting the local church very frequently. I'd never been to the church myself, but I had met the priest, whom Eleanora always called "His Holiness." He'd visited my estate, and I'd received him as part of my duties as the lord of this county. The priest seemed to be a truly good man, so it was no wonder that the community revered him and called him "His Holiness." I kept thinking that one of these days, I should visit the church itself, but I always came up with one reason or another to put it off.

Eleanora's basically my family, so it's nice that she acts as a bridge between politics and religion in the county. I should reward her greatly! I'm proud of you, my dear Eleanora!

"Thank you for your work," I said. "I'm sure it must've been a lot of trouble."

"Nonsense, it was no trouble at all! I just helped out a little in the beginning. After that, I didn't do anything!"

“What exactly *did* you do...?”

“I was in charge of weighing out the ingredients! His Holiness said that calculations should be no problem for a graduate of the Royal Academy like me.”

His Holiness may be giving the Royal Academy too much credit. It's just a place the nobility are forced to go to so they can make social connections to advance their futures. Anyone who wants to actually become an academic just becomes an apprentice to one. Well, I guess a majority of Academy graduates can probably look at a recipe and calculate the correct amount of ingredients.

The girl standing before me, however, was not a member of that majority. Oblivious, she blathered on. “But Kye said... Oh, Kye is one of the older boys. He said, ‘I’ll take over. A princess shouldn’t be working.’”

“Good job, Kye,” I said approvingly.

“I couldn’t say no to a young boy doing his best to be chivalrous like a knight.”

“I see. So you didn’t actually have much to do in the latter half of the event.”

“I must say, I still can’t believe Kye called me a princess,” Eleanora remarked, a blissful look on her face.

I mean, of course she’s a princess. Her current dresses aren’t as fancy as the ones she used to wear, but they’re still the kind of dresses that only an aristocrat would be seen in. Also, I feel like Kye might not have been completely sincere when he called her a princess, but I wasn’t actually there, so I can’t say for sure.

Despite everything, I was relieved to see that Eleanora was back to her usual self. I understood why Sanon worried about her.

I decided to wrap up my relaxation time with Eleanora and start taking care of all of the work that had piled up during my convalescence. As I walked the halls of the mansion, I couldn’t help but take notice of a shadow out of the corner of my eye. The shadow was cast by a tree in the yard, but it had stretched its way into the mansion through the window in a manner that seemed both unnatural and suspicious.

“Hm...?” Without thinking, I stuck my hand out, and it sank into the shadow.

The shadow rippled like the surface of water—and the sensation against my skin even felt like water. “Aha, got you.” I found my prey, and my hand closed around something and pulled it up.

Out of the shadow came a black-haired boy. I had grabbed him by his ankle, so he came out upside down.

Oh, I thought it was your wrist. Sorry.

“This territory used to be mine and mine only,” Lemn said with a long-suffering sigh, as he dangled upside down before me. “Why do you keep doing reckless things based only on intuition?”

I ignored his complaint. “What kind of devious scheme are you planning now, Lemn?”

“How rude! When have I ever come up with a devious scheme?”

“Well...” I frowned, my brow creasing in thought. “Wait, actually...?”

Now that he mentions it, I don’t think he really has come up with any devious schemes. I just have such a strong impression of him as some twisted, evil crook that I might have made that up. As those thoughts crossed my mind, Lemn favored me with a triumphant smile. *Hey, you’re still trespassing, buddy.*

I slowly lowered him to the ground and said, “I didn’t realize you’d come back here. Sorry for leaving you in 2’s world.”

“I’m fine. I jumped into your shadow as soon as you started turning back time.”

“Can you stop entering my shadow without permission?” I grumbled. “Although it looks like I’ll be able to deal with you from now on even if you do hide in shadows.”

“Shadows are part of my domain, so I don’t think you have a right to complain about which shadows I’m in.”

“Did you know that if you win a war, you are generally permitted to annex the loser’s domain?”

Le mn blanched. “My apologies. I’ll be more considerate about where I go around you, miss.”

Since no one had detected Lemn's presence until now, that meant that he'd been free to invade our privacy and spy on us.

I guess he's actually the god of Peeping Toms. He might've even been peeping on me while I was taking baths. What a pervert.

"Huh? What's going on?" Lemn said, confused at my darkening expression. "I said I would be considerate, so why are you looking at me with such contempt?"

"Setting that aside... You can communicate with your other selves in the parallel worlds, right?"

"I can. Why do you ask...?"

"I wanted to know if 2's doing well over there."

I was curious as to what 2 had been doing since I left. That world's timeline was now roughly around when the Demon Lord battle ended, right around the middle of her third year at the Academy. Perhaps she was planning on graduating from the Academy, or even traveling to new lands.

I guess it's only been a week, so there probably hasn't been too much change.

"Oh, that world. It seems like there's a lot going on."

"A lot? It's only been a week."

"Oh..." Lemn made a face that made it clear he'd slipped up.

What kind of incident happened in such a short time? Is there "a lot" going on with Yumiella 2, or with the entire world? Taking into account this god's nature, it's probably the latter.

"Maybe I should go check on her after all..."

"No, that's not what I meant! Don't just go around creating dimensional warps without thinking!" Lemn snapped.

"But there's been some kind of incident, hasn't there?"

"It's not like an incident has happened in just a week. The time in parallel worlds always moves accordingly so that every timeline remains synced. In this case, time in that world moved faster and time in this world moved slower so

that things could equalize... I think they should both be on about the same timeline now."

I had turned time back in World 2 by about one year. If that time had caught up to its original timeline, then a year had already passed in her world.

"That's why things have already settled over there," Lemn said, gesturing for me to calm down. "So there's no reason for you to go over there, okay?"

"If a whole year has passed, I want to go see what 2's up to now."

A whole year after 2 promised to do better this time... What is she doing now, and who is she with? It's not like I'm worried or anything, I'm just...going to go bother her. Yeah, I'm going to tease her and laugh at her. I guess I'm not going for good reasons in that case, but I'm nonetheless in a hurry. Let's go right away.

"Even if you want to visit the parallel world, you can't. I have the secateur," the god of darkness reminded me.

"So you're probably not going to give it back to me, huh?"

The secateur, Keep Living, was much too dangerous an object to leave lying around. I wasn't confident in my ability to properly manage it, so I'd decided to leave it with Lemn. He wouldn't give it back to me for personal use, but I knew without a doubt that if the world was in crisis, he would bring me the secateur. He was a twisted god, but I had faith in that at the very least.

Darn, I can't go to the parallel world without it. It's impossible without the sword...right? It would be worth trying if I had something to use in place of it. Something that could replace god's gardening shears used to prune worlds... Maybe my bare hands? There's a small chance that with my strength as it is now, my bare hands might work.

"Oh," I said with some surprise. "It worked."

"What in the world is going on with your body, miss?"

I had twisted my hands as if I was tearing something open in midair, and a dimensional warp had appeared.

I guess at the end of the day, when you're in trouble, you can always just brute

force things. Though, it was probably a mistake to open a portal right here. If he sees this...

As if summoned, Patrick appeared at the other end of the hall. He noticed the dimensional warp right away.

“Why is *that* in the house?”

“Apparently a year has already passed over there!” I exclaimed. “Let’s go see how 2’s doing!”

In these kinds of situations, you just have to win the other person over with enthusiasm! One of the great things about Patrick is that he takes the time to understand the way I think, and then he accepts it. He’s probably antsy too, wondering how 2’s doing. He’ll definitely be on board with this plan.

He looked at me doubtfully. “She probably has her own life now. I don’t think we should be interfering.”

“What? You don’t want to go? Maybe 2’s opened a café or something, and she has no customers and is gloomy. We’d get to laugh at her misery!”

“Why can’t you just be honest about your feelings?” Patrick asked, clearly exasperated.

“Honest? What are you talking about? I just want to make fun of her.”

Someone with no industry experience could never run a successful café. I can totally imagine 2, who’s surprisingly plebeian in her tastes, wanting to be the owner of a stylish little café. I, a beautiful and prosperous countess, will go to her unsuccessful little shop and point out everything she’s doing wrong.

“You shouldn’t go,” Patrick said, shaking his head even though I had assumed he’d be excited to join me. “You’re just going to fight with her again. I know you’re worried about her, but I’m sure she must have her own plans for her life.”

“I’m going to go, even if you stop me...” I insisted. “You’re the one who said you loved my strong, unwavering heart.”

“And now I regret saying it,” Patrick lamented. Still, he decided to come with me in the end.

You should know that it's precisely because you spoil me like this that I get carried away, Patrick.

With nothing but the clothes on our backs, we jumped into the dimensional warp and traveled to World 2.

The view before me was familiar, but this *was* a different world, so I had to keep my guard up.

Wait... Huh?

"Where are we?"

My boyfriend looked around with some confusion. "It's not anywhere I know."

It was exactly as Patrick said—this was supposed to be a parallel world, with exactly the same world map, but we didn't seem to have traveled to an analogous spot on the map. When I had opened last week's portal in the grassy field outside Dolkness Village, it took us to a balcony at the Royal Palace. So where had we ended up after passing through a warp that I'd opened inside my estate...?

It was a completely open field, with no buildings visible nearby. Fortunately, I could see maintained roads well-worn with wheel tracks. This was likely the main road leading to a nearby town.

"I guess all we can do is follow the road," I suggested.

"I'm sure we'll find some people if we keep walking," Patrick agreed.

We walked side by side down the road. While the evidence seemed to indicate that the path was well traveled, we hadn't run into anyone yet.

Are there just no people here? Did Yumiella 2 make the same mistakes again...?

"Oh look, there's a wagon coming this way," Patrick pointed out.

Oh. There are totally people here. I guess 2 isn't so clumsy that she'd fail badly enough to destroy the world a second time. The worst that's probably happened is her café went under, and she's spending her days dungeon crawling to pay off

her debts or something like that.

Before saying goodbye, 2 had mentioned that she would beat me in strength, social standing, and romance, but I doubted she'd be able to pull any of it off. There was no way she could surpass me in strength with my level cap unlocked. As for social standing, despite how I might seem, I was still a countess. And as for romance, I was dating Patrick, who was perfect, so she had no chance.

The wagon was coming closer. I could see a middle-aged man, a peddler, leisurely holding the reins of the horse pulling the wagon.

I'm glad things seem peaceful. I should get information about 2 from him... No, I need to first ask where we are.

The peddler seemed suspicious of us, standing in the middle of nowhere with no luggage or anything, but his face settled into a smile as he stopped his wagon.

"Hello! What are you two doing in a place like this?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, well, we're in a bit of a complicated situation..." I said.

"If you keep going straight you'll reach Liesdamia. I'm sure you'll be able to find somewhere for the two of you to live and some work for him," the peddler assured me, nodding towards Patrick.

"Work...?" I echoed, confused.

"I'm sure things are rough for you, but good luck," the man said encouragingly. "Even if you're in new lands, you'll be okay as long as you support each other. There won't be any disapproving relatives trying to keep you apart in Liesdamia."

He totally thinks we ran away from our families to elope, doesn't he? We're a young couple just walking along the road without any indication that we'd planned on traveling. Yeah, even I could see us as lovers on the run. I guess his misunderstanding helps us though. I'll play along and get some more information.

I'd heard of Liesdamia before. It was a provincial city quite a ways from Dolkness County, but it was still within the borders of the Kingdom of Valschein.

If I recalled correctly, it was in a sizable county.

I'm not confident that I'm thinking of the right place, and it might even be somewhere with the same name in a different kingdom. I should pretend to not know for sure so that I can confirm with the peddler.

"Thank you so much for your consideration. I do have a question, though. Are you referring to Liesdamia, the city in the Kingdom of Valschein?"

"Ha ha, why of course I mean the Kingdom of Valschein... Wait, no, sorry. It's not the Kingdom of Valschein anymore."

Liesdamia isn't part of the kingdom anymore? But it's not on the border... If the borders between kingdoms have moved that drastically, could it be that this world has fallen into some turbulent times?

I instantly tensed up. I could sense that Patrick was starting to get nervous as well.

What kingdom did Liesdamia join, then?

"It's not like anything has really changed that much day-to-day though," the peddler said with a friendly smile. "It's Liesdamia City, in the state of Valschein, in the Holy Empire of Dolkness."

"The Holy Empire of...Dolkness?"

"Oh, have you not heard the biggest news of the century? It made headlines all across the continent."

"I'm sorry, I'm a bit out of touch when it comes to the state of the world..." I managed.

Huh? What? Huh?

As I stood there feeling completely lost, the peddler settled into a more narrative style, clearly relishing the chance to tell the story to a new audience.

"Our sole empress, Her Imperial Majesty, the honorable Yumiella Dolkness, succeeded in doing what no man has ever done before! She brought the five great kingdoms, as well as the countless smaller kingdoms in the surrounding lands, all under her unified control! She did what policymakers of the past longed to do! She birthed a unified nation upon this continent!"

What?! That's insane! What the hell?!

My mind couldn't keep up with the information coming in. Seeing the blank expressions on our faces, the peddler scratched his face, looking a little sheepish about his dramatic rendition of the news.

"You haven't heard all that before? It was constantly announced all over the place until just a short while ago."

"It's the first time I've heard of it... So, um, this Yumiella person became the empress?"

"She sure did. Oh, maybe the people of your hometown haven't heard any details about Her Imperial Majesty. Empress Dolkness has black hair, just like you, miss. I think she might be around your age too. I just thought you should know, in case your families didn't want you two together because of your hair color or something."

"I-I see, Her Imperial Majesty has black hair as well. I'll keep that in mind."

Before I could even wonder if the empress was someone who coincidentally had the same name as Yumiella 2, that possibility had crumbled away. There was no doubt that this was the Yumiella 2 that I knew.

What the hell is she doing?! Also, what is this Holy Empire of Dolkness like? Yumiella 2, are you conducting a reign of terror? Are you forcing people to slave away and create an ostentatious tomb for you or something? You might get stabbed if you're not careful.

I decided to casually gather information on the current state of things.

"Things must have changed a lot since the empire was established," I hazarded.

"Hmm..." the peddler said, thinking it over. "Not a lot has changed around me, so I'm not really sure... The ones actually running the government are the former royal family of Valschein, so it's not really all that different."

"Oh, so the former royal family are in good health."

"The only thing that really changed is the borders of each former kingdom. If people try to act like they used to and start warring, Her Imperial Majesty will

have her eye on them. Well, since we're all part of the same empire now, I guess it would be an internal conflict, not a real war. Regardless, there's a lot more travel over what used to be the borders of kingdoms. That seems to be better for the economy overall."

I'd read in books in my version of this world that in the Kingdom of Valschein, internal conflict between territories usually didn't get too violent. This was because of the fact that if provincial aristocrats got too extreme with their actions, the royal family would interfere and penalize both parties. This was possible because the central army commanded by the royal family was a large and well-organized one, a real force to be reckoned with.

Yumiella 2 had basically done the same thing on a continental scale, and with only her own power to boot. Even if the people liked her, the former kings and aristocrats surely loathed her. She would likely have to fight off every person in the world's desire for domination for the rest of her life. The entire success of this empire hinged on 2 alone. She was basically an agency, not a human.

Will she actually be happy like that? If this is an empire ruled by a lonely empress, I'll destroy it. I have to go see 2. But before I do that, I should get a sense of how her subjects feel about her.

"The empire sounds incredible," I said, trying to sound enthusiastic. "What kind of person is Her Imperial Majesty?"

The peddler considered. "If it comes to recent things she's done, I guess the husband auditions come to mind."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Her Imperial Majesty is on an extensive search for a significant other. She's gathered good-looking men from all over the continent, and she's planning on picking a husband from that pool." He got a little bit starry-eyed. "I'd love to become Her Imperial Majesty's husband and live an easy life."

Oh... I see now. Yumiella 2 is actually just doing whatever she wants. After obtaining power, she's decided to push the limits of her desires. What an idiot! See if I care!

After thanking the peddler, we said goodbye and went our separate ways.

Despite the short length of the conversation, I was strangely exhausted. I felt even more fatigued than when I had turned back this world's timeline.

I stood there blankly as I watched the wagon shrink into the distance.

I'd been so overwhelmed by trying to collect my own thoughts that I hadn't realized Patrick hadn't said a word. He was probably thinking about all of this even more deeply than I was, and perhaps this was making him even more exhausted than me.

Wow, the Holy Empire of Dolkness, I thought with an internal sigh.

"I wonder what makes it so holy..." I wondered aloud.

"*That's* your first concern?" Patrick asked, flabbergasted.

"I mean, there are other things..." I allowed.

Yumiella 2 had really gone and done some crazy things. I had no energy left in me to actually go and see her.

Let's just go home for now. I'll go back to my room and sleep. Hopefully I can just forget everything about this.

The moments dragged on as we stood there silently. Then, without a word, we turned as one and started walking in the direction we came from.

"Let's go home..." I muttered.

"Yeah," Patrick nodded.

Well, I guess I'm glad to see that Yumiella 2 is doing all right...

I mean, I guess I should be glad...?

Afterword

Hello, it's been a while. I'm Satori Tanabata. Thank you very much for picking up the previous volume, as well as reading this one.

This series is titled *Villainess Level 99: I May Be the Hidden Boss but I'm Not the Demon Lord*, but the villainess elements seem to have largely disappeared. Some people may disagree, but the first volume was definitely a villainess story. The villainess-ness of Act 2 might still be debatable, but as for Act 3...not so much. Not only that, but our "villainess" is now over level 99 in this volume, and there are certainly no suspicions left that she is the Demon Lord... The subtitle should probably just be changed to *I Am the Hidden Boss*.

While I'm at it, I'm considering changing the name I write under to "Slowly McWriterson."

The cover features two Yumiellas. Thank you, Tea, for capturing how they don't get along while also making them seem like partners. Patrick and Eleanora look lively as well, which means that it's truly an incredible illustration.

The comic adaptation is also currently being published in *B's-LOG COMICS* to great acclaim. The art is beautiful, and the pacing of the story is great. It's an incredibly high-quality manga. Every month I'm on the edge of my seat, excited for the new chapter. I'm truly grateful to Nocomi.

And finally, to my two editors, the illustrator Tea, the proofreaders, everyone else involved in the publishing of this book, and everyone who continued to pick up this series, I truly thank you.



“I’m the
god of
darkness,
Lemn.
Wake up, my
priestess.”



“You have
the wrong
person.”

VILLAINESS
LEVEL 99
I May Be the Hidden Boss But I'm Not the Demon Lord

3

Patrick Ashbatten
The second-born son of the margrave
and Yumiella's fiancé

“Yumiella Dolkness, I will eliminate you.”

Sanon
The god of light.

“Your eyes are scaring me, miss.”

Lemn
The god of darkness.

“I won’t bother you two, so please adorably feed each other all you like.”

Eleanora Hillrose
The former duke’s only daughter.
A pushy airhead.

“Do you know how to increase the level cap, Lemn? Tell me the secrets of level cap unlocking, please.”

Yumiella Dolkness
The villainess and hidden boss of an otome game.

The Yumiella that destroyed her world descends upon this one!

The twisted space of the dimensional warp began to wobble and distort. The waves grew larger, and from within the warp appeared... my other self. It was the Yumiella from the parallel world.

“What a brutal welcome...”



VILLAINESS LEVEL 99

I May Be the Hidden Boss
But I'm Not the Demon Lord



SATORI TANABATA

ILLUST. TEA



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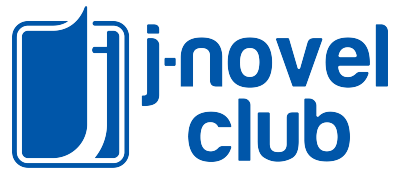
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Villainess Level 99: I May Be the Hidden Boss but I'm Not the Demon Lord Act
3

by Satori Tanabata

Translated by sachi salehi

Edited by Rachel L Kohler

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Illustrations by Tea

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